彩雲国物語

4

由羅カイリ
原作◎雪乃紗衣

ASUKA COMICS DX

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紅家の貧乏お嬢様・秀麗の夢は、彩雲国初の女性官吏になること。まだ女性に受験資格はないけど諦めず、超厳しい上司・黄奇人の下でも日々大奮闘！ そんな秀麗の夢を後押しするように起草された、若き国王・劉輝の「女人受験制導入案」だけど、ホントに可決されるの!? …秀麗、運命の分かれ道！ そして、紫青の秘密と、奇人の仮面の下の素顔も初公開!!

彩雲国物語

由羅カイリ
Kairi Yura

1月16日生まれ／山羊座／B型
「絵にもかけない奇人の素顔」と「燕青はどこまで毛むくじゃらなのか」を考え続けた「黄金の約束」編でした。
感想などいただけると嬉しいです。

雪乃紗衣
Sai Yukino

1月26日生まれ／水瓶座／B型
金のなる木に可愛い花が。
花弁が4枚やら5枚やらごちゃまぜで「あんたと同じに適当ねぇ」と家族。
いいじゃん。

第13話

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あらすじと人物紹介

人手不足の外朝で、居候の燕青と共にピンチヒッターとして働くことになった紅家の貧乏お嬢様・秀麗。女人禁制の外朝で男子に扮し、超厳しい上司・黄奇人の下で働く毎日は「キツイ！」の一言!! しかし、彩雲国初の女性官吏を目指す秀麗は、夢へ向かって大奮闘していた。そんな中、彩雲国の若き国王・劉輝が「国試女人受験制」という奇案を発表した！ 不可能だった夢への道が、少し開いたのだけど…!?

此 静蘭

秀麗の父・邵可に拾われ、以後、紅家に仕える家人。劉輝の実兄。

紅 秀麗

名門で貧乏(?)な紅家のお嬢様。彩雲国初の女性官吏を目指す。

紫 劉輝

彩雲国の若き国王。後宮を後にした秀麗をずっと思い続けている。

浪 燕青

邵可邸に居候し秀麗と共に黄奇人の下で働く人物。静蘭の古い知人。

藍 楸瑛

武官。主上の警護をする羽林軍の将軍も務める。同期の絳攸とはくされ縁。

李 絳攸

宮廷随一の才人と名高い文官(実態は窓際官吏?)。絶望的な方向音痴。

What exactly is this key?
At first glance, I can't even tell that it's a key.
No matter how many times I look at it, it's still so mysterious...
touch
click
clank
!

ASSISTANT MINISTER, KEI!
SINCE HE PASSED AWAY WITHOUT DISCLOSING HOW TO MAKE THAT KEY, NO ONE HAS BEEN ABLE TO EVEN MAKE A REPLICA.
IT'S GOT AN INTERESTING SHAPE AND STRUCTURE, RIGHT?
IT'S SUPPOSEDLY A MASTERPIECE CREATED BY A MASTER LOCKSMITH WHO HAS PASSED AWAY.
COULD YOU STAND ON GUARD WITH ENSEI-SAN AND ACCOMPANY HIM?
Yes sir!
I'M GOING TO THE INSPECTION EARLY TODAY.
COULD YOU PLEASE HANG THE KEY ON MY WAIST?
THE DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE OVERSEES THIS COUNTRY'S FINANCE,
BUT IT'S ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE TREASURE CHAMBER.
TO THE TREASURE CHAMBER?
Hmmm...

WHAT'S THE MATTER? YOU WERE VERY INTERESTED IN THIS, RIGHT?
YES! I AM VERY INTERESTED!
BUT...
EVEN IF I WERE TO VISIT THE TREASURE CHAMBER EVERYDAY...
I HAVE NO DOUBT I'LL STILL BE DAZZLED BY THESE TREASURES THERE.
The treasure chamber is a dreadful place.
I FEEL I'M IN A WORLD FAR DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE SURROUNDED BY MERELY RICE AND WHEAT.
I won't be able to see everything no matter how many days I stay there.
I SUPPOSE I'M A LITTLE TIRED...
Sigh
IT'S SUNDAY TOMORROW...
...SO, JUST TAKE A BREAK FROM EVERYTHING AND TRY TO REGAIN YOUR ENERGY.

OKAY, BUT...
...IS THAT REALLY OKAY? AREN'T YOU IN NEED OF MORE WORKERS?
DIDN'T YOU ONCE SAY THAT IF YOUR BODY BREAKS DOWN, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING?
RESTING WHEN YOU NEED TO IS ALSO PART OF YOUR JOB.
Make arrangements for this immediately.
Oh, dear...
YES, SIR.
laughs
WHAT IS IT?
OH NOTHING.
SEE YOU THEN, ASSISTANT MINISTER KEI!
Great, more work!
Just what kind of magic did Shuu-kun use?
He seems to be in a good mood today.

I can sense Shourei's presence very keenly.
Why do I also have to be involved...?
These days, I do feel weird after all.
Maybe this is what the commoners call "the sixth sense"!
I got it!
SHUUREI MIGHT BE CALLING FOR ME.
IF THIS IS TRUE... NO, IT MUST BE TRUE.
IT'S BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE WE SEPARATED.
SO, EVEN IF I GO NOW TO SEE HER JUST THIS ONCE, SHE WON'T GET ANGRY AT ME.

I must go see Shuurei!
WELCOME, RYUUKI! ♡
steamy
hot
EVEN SHUUEI ONCE SAID THAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO HAVE A CHANGE OF MOOD AT TIMES.
SINCE I HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF MY OFFICIAL DUTIES DURING THE DAY, I'LL GO AT NIGHT.
Half of those nagging guards of mine had to leave to subjugate the bandits
So, it should be easy for me to sneak out.
I HAVE TO PREPARE SOME GIFTS AND LETTERS!
I SEE...
THIS MUST BE WHAT THE COMMONERS CALL "YOBAI"!
I HAVE TO SEND A MESSAGE TO SHOUKA, TELLING HIM THAT I WILL COME FOR A YOBAI.
HE DIDN'T ACTUALLY KNOW WHAT "YOBAI" MEANT.
iso
iso

*Note. "Yobai" (night-crawling), stealing into a girl's bedroom at night for sex.

BROTHER! NO, I MEAN "BOSS"! THERE'S THE CITY WALL!
I CAN SEE KIYOU!
HMPH! KIYOU'S JUST THE BEGIN-NING!

LISTEN, YOUSHUN. AS SOON AS YOU ENTER KIYOU, DO NOT LOOK AROUND TOO MUCH.
IF YOU LOOK LIKE A COUNTRY BUMPKIN, WE'LL BE LOOKED DOWN ON BY EVERYONE.
YES, BOSS!

FOR WE, THE BANDIT GROUP "CONDORS OF SASHUU",
HAVE COME TO KIYOU TO CARRY OUT A CRUEL REQUEST THAT ONLY BANDITS ARE CAPABLE OF COMPLETING.
WOW, BOSS, YOU LOOK SO COOL!
clap
clap
BUT, SINCE WE'VE COME ALL THE WAY TO THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL, IT SHOULD BE OKAY FOR ME TO HAVE SOME FUN WITH THE PRETTY GIRLS HERE, RIGHT?
LET'S EAT LOTS OF DELICIOUS FOOD TOO!
AND BUY SOME SOUVENIRS FROM SHI-SHUU AS WELL.
YES! WE ALSO NEED TO TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT THE CITY!
YEAH! WE'LL HAVE TONS OF FUN TOMOR-ROW!

A-CHOO!
OH NO, ENSEI, DID YOU CATCH A COLD?
NO, NOT REALLY.
JUST WAIT FOR ME, THE MAN WITH A CROSS-SHAPED SCAR ON THE LEFT CHEEK!
caw!
caw!
YOU RECEIVED A "SOUVENIR" FROM MINISTER KOU, RIGHT?
ARE YOU GOING TO BE OKAY FOR TOMORROW?
DON'T OVERWORK YOURSELF, OKAY? YOU ARE AT THAT AGE...
BUT, ONCE I EAT YOUR FOOD, I'LL BE JUST FINE.
OH YEAH, I RECEIVED MOUNTAINS OF DOCUMENTS TO APPROVE.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY, SEIRAN?
NOTHING.
hehe
PRINCESS, JUST HOW OLD DO YOU THINK I AM...?
sniff
HUH?!
I'll kill you!
I'll reveal your true nature!
WELCOME HOME, FATHER.
DINNER WILL BE READY SHORTLY.
WOW, EVERYONE LOOKS REALLY HAPPY!
PRINCESS?
ENSEI, CAN I TALK TO YOU FOR A 'SEC?

sizzle
sizzle

DON'T TELL ME THAT YOU DIDN'T SLEEP AT ALL?
clink
DARK DULL
WHAT THE?! IT'S MORNING AREADY?!

I ONLY PULLED ONE ALL-NIGHTER.
IF I EAT SOME BREAK-FAST, I'LL BE JUST FINE. NO WORRIES!
yawn
creak
So much trash...
NAH, IT'S FINE. I'LL GO WITH YOU. IF I MAKE YOU GO OUT ALONE, SEIRAN'S SERI-OUSLY GONNA KILL ME.
...SO YOU CAN'T TODAY, AFTER ALL?

SERI-OUSLY? THEN LET'S HURRY UP AND EAT, AND THEN GO!
shock
"BREAK-FAST"? IT'S ALMOST NOON, YOU KNOW?

SINCE IT'S THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY MOTHER'S DEATH TOMORROW, I THOUGHT I'D CLEAN HER GRAVE TODAY.
ISN'T THE PERIOD FOR GRAVE VISITS ALMOST OVER?
SO, WE'RE CLEANING GRAVES HERE?
PRINCESS, SHALL WE UPROOT THAT YOUNG TREE AND TAKE IT BACK WITH US?
WHY?
IT'S REALLY HOT THIS YEAR, SO THE FLOWERS ARE NOT REALLY BLOOMING.
The garden?
I FEEL OUR GARDEN LOOKS A LITTLE BIT LONELY.
I WANT TO PLANT SOME FLOWERS OR TREES.

OKAY.
THANKS, BUT IT'S OKAY. IT'S TOO HEAVY AND BULKY TO CARRY BACK.
I'M ABOUT TO WRAP THINGS UP NOW, SO I CAN STOP BOTHERING YOU GUYS SOON.
OH YEAH, ENSEI, WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE BUSINESS YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO TAKE CARE OF WHEN YOU FIRST CAME HERE?
WHAT YOU JUST SAID MADE ME REALLY HAPPY!
OH REALLY? SOMEHOW I FEEL A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED HEARING THAT.
7 more days...
OKAY.
WELL, MAYBE ABOUT 7 MORE DAYS.
I WAS THINKING OF STAYING UNTIL EVERYONE HAS RETURNED TO THE REVENUE DEPARTMENT.
HOW MUCH LONGER WILL YOU STAY?

IS IT A RESERVED LOCATION?
THE FLOWERS MUST BE FROM FATHER OR SEIRAN. ONE OF THEM BEAT ME TO IT.
WOW, IT'S BUILT AT A REALLY NICE LOCATION.
I'M SO SORRY ...
WHEN I WAS LITTLE, A THIEF KILLED OFF EVER SINGLE ONE OF THEM. I WAS THE SOLE SURVIVOR.
YEAH, I HAD SIX SIBLINGS.
HOW ABOUT YOUR FAMILY, ENSEI?

YOU COULD SAY THAT.
BUT YOUR MOTHER MUST HAVE BEEN A REALLY GOOD COOK.
SHE WORKED VERY HARD, BUT SHE WAS PROBABLY NOT THE KIND OF PERSON YOU IMAGINE.
IT'S ALL IN THE PAST NOW...
pat
pat
SHE ALSO TOOK GREAT CARE OF ME BACK WHEN I HAD A VERY WEAK BODY.
WHAT?
...BUT, SHE ALWAYS ENJOYED DOING EVERYTHING, AND SHE PLAYED WITH ME ALL THE TIME.
SHE WAS JUST AS CLUMSY AS MY FATHER...
YOUR MOTHER MUST HAVE BEEN PROTECTING YOU, THEN.
IT'S TRUE. AFTER MY MOTHER PASSED AWAY, MY HEALTH GOT MUCH BETTER.
YOU'RE KIDDING, RIGHT?
I USED TO HAVE A VERY WEAK BODY!
WHO?
A VERY WEAK BODY?
Don't give me that look!

IT WAS THUNDERING THAT DAY.
THAT'S WHY YOU HATE THUNDER, HUH?
MOTHER WAS A VERY ENERGETIC AND STRONG PERSON.
SHE WAS STILL SMILING THE DAY BEFORE, BUT THEN ALL OF A SUDDEN...
Mother!
SHE JUST STOPPED MOVING, THE NEXT DAY.
Mother!

SHE PASSED AWAY AS IF FALLING INTO A DEEP SLUMBER IN THAT VIOLENT STORM.
BUT, AFTER SHE PASSED AWAY, I SOON HEALED COMPLETELY.
REALLY?
I... MOTHER'S LIFE...
I'VE BEEN ABSORBING MY MOTHER'S LIFE!
YOUR MOTHER MUST'VE BEEN PROTECTING YOU EVER SINCE.
tears drip

I could never tell Father and Seiran this...
Although they loved Mother just as much as I did...
For my sake, they would never say anything to me.
Even if I told them, they'd surely comfort me and say something like "That's not true".
MOTHER DIED FOR ME!
NO WAY!
I HATE ... SUMMER...
AND THUNDER, TOO. IT TOOK AWAY EVERYTHING IMPORTANT FROM ME.
EVEN IF THAT WERE TRUE, YOUR MOTHER WOULD HAVE WANTED THAT WAY.

...I'd always wished for someone to deny it...

What I'd always wanted to say and...

...The fact that I might have been the one to shatter those happier times...

...What I'd always wanted to hear...

IF YOU ALWAYS CRY WHENEVER SUMMER ARRIVES, YOUR MOTHER MUST BE CRYING TOO IN HER GRAVE.
SEIRAN AND SHOUKA-SAN WERE REALLY WORRIED ABOUT YOU.
THAT'S HOW YOU BECAME MORE AND MORE DEPRESSED DAY BY DAY.
I ... I'VE FORGOTTEN THEM ALL.
BECAUSE I HAVE MANY IMPORTANT MEMORIES. HOW ABOUT YOU?
ALTHOUGH I ALSO LOST MY FAMILY IN SUMMER, I'VE ALWAYS LOVED SUMMER.

I'M SURE YOU'LL RECALL YOUR HAPPY MEMORIES. THEN, YOU'LL START LIKING SUMMER AGAIN.
IT'LL BE A WASTE IF YOU HAVE TO SKIP SUMMER EVERY YEAR.
MAYBE...
sniffle
OF COURSE.
YOU'RE SIXTEEN NOW, A GREAT TIME IN LIFE. YOU'RE NOT FAR FROM BECOMING A REAL ADULT.
THIS YEAR, YOU WILL WALK OUT OF THE SHADOWS OF SUMMER ONCE AND FOR ALL.
IF YOU JUST CONTINUE MAKING PEOPLE WORRY ABOUT YOU, THEN YOU'LL REMAIN A CHILD FOREVER.
I'VE LET YOU ACT LIKE A CHILD IN FRONT OF ME, SO NOW YOU CAN DO THIS FOR ME, CAN'T YOU?

YOU ARE A VERY KIND YET STRICT PERSON, AREN'T YOU?
THAT'S THE SECRET TO BEING A GREAT MAN.
...!
WHY DON'T YOU SHAVE THAT SHAGGY BEARD OF YOURS FIRST?
THE FACT THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE CHARM OF MY WILD-LOOKING BEARD IS PROOF THAT YOU ARE STILL JUST A KID.
BY TOMOR-ROW.
scrub
scrub
WHAT?
BY THE TIME THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY MOTHER'S DEATH ROLLS BY TOMOR-ROW, I'LL BECOME STRONGER!
AND YOU'LL BE ONE STEP CLOSER TO BECOMING A WOMAN.

Hehehe
Teee
flip
flip
flip
IT'S KINDA GROSS...
HE SEEMS TO BE IN A SUSPICIOUSLY GOOD MOOD TODAY.
KOUYUU!
NO WAY! IF IT HAD BEEN, HE WOULD'VE SLAUGHTERED US ALREADY.
HE'D PROBABLY BE LIKE, "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!".
WAS SHUUREI'S SECRET LEAKED?

I'VE ALREADY FINISHED APPROVING THESE DOCUMENTS!
SO, WHAT'S NEXT?
YOUR HIGHNESS, DID YOU EAT SOMETHING STRANGE THAT YOU RANDOMLY GOT YOUR HANDS ON?
WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM?
IS THAT SO?
IT'S BECAUSE I'VE DECIDED TO EXECUTE OPERATION "YOBAI", TONIGHT!
KOUYUU'S JUST REALLY TOUCHED BY THE FACT THAT YOUR HIGHNESS IS SO PUMPED UP.
chuckle

I WROTE A LETTER EXPLAINING MY INTENTION AND FORMALLY SUBMITTED IT TO SHOUKA.
THEN HE GRANTED MY REQUEST IN HIS REPLY.
AT SHUUREI-DONO'S?
"Yobai"?!
"I SHALL VISIT AT NIGHT. I WOULD LIKE TO DINE THERE AND LISTEN TO SHUUREI PLAY THE ERHU."
"IT'D BE EVEN BETTER IF I COULD SPEND THE NIGHT TOGETHER WITH SHOUKA AND SEIRAN, TOO." THAT'S WHAT I WROTE.
exhale
It's merely a visit!
How can you call that "yobai"?!

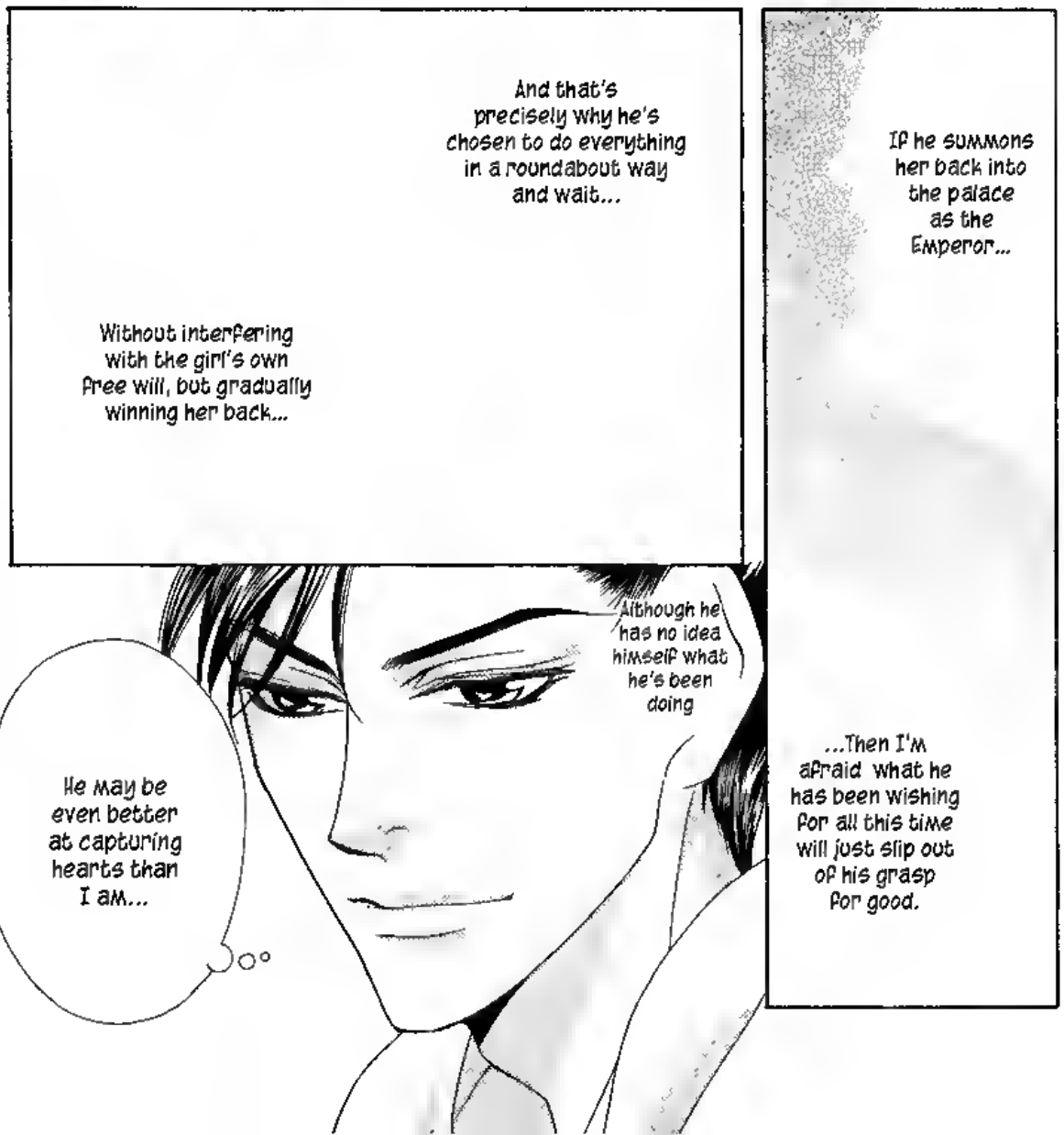
YOUR HIGHNESS, I'LL HAVE TO SAY IT UPFRONT THAT I AM, AFTER ALL, THE GENERAL OF YOUR PERSONAL GUARDS...
...HAVING SO BLUNTLY CONFESSED YOUR PLAN, AREN'T YOU AFRAID THAT I MIGHT INTERFERE WITH IT?
BUT, I'LL COME BACK IN TIME FOR THE CONFERENCE IN THE MORNING.
AND DIDN'T YOU SAY YOURSELF THAT EVERYONE NEEDS A BREAK ONCE IN A WHILE?
YOUR HONESTY.. HAS EARNED MY RESPECT..
AWW, SHUCKS...
That wasn't a compliment.
WELL, SINCE YOU'RE ONLY GOING TO STAY FOR ONE NIGHT AT SHOUKA-SAMA'S PLACE, I GUESS IT SHOULDN'T BE THAT BIG AN ISSUE.
RIGHT, KOUYUU?

glance
OKAY!
THERE'S NOTHING THAT I CAN'T DO RIGHT NOW!
SO IF YOU'RE GOING, YOU'LL NEED TO DO EXTRA WORK NOW TO MAKE UP FOR YOUR ABSENCE.
EVEN IF I WERE TO SAY NO, I'M SURE YOU WOULD STILL GO.
OKAY! LEAVE IT TO ME!
AND WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, PLEASE CLEAN YOUR DESK.
OKAY!
THEN PLEASE FINISH THESE DOCUMENTS, AND THEN THESE TOO.
You managed to make him do chores.
HIS HIGHNESS HAS A VERY TALENTED ATTENDANT IN YOU.
LET'S MAKE SURE THAT WE UTILIZE IT THOROUGHLY.
I SIMPLY CANNOT LET HIS EXCITEMENT GO TO WASTE.

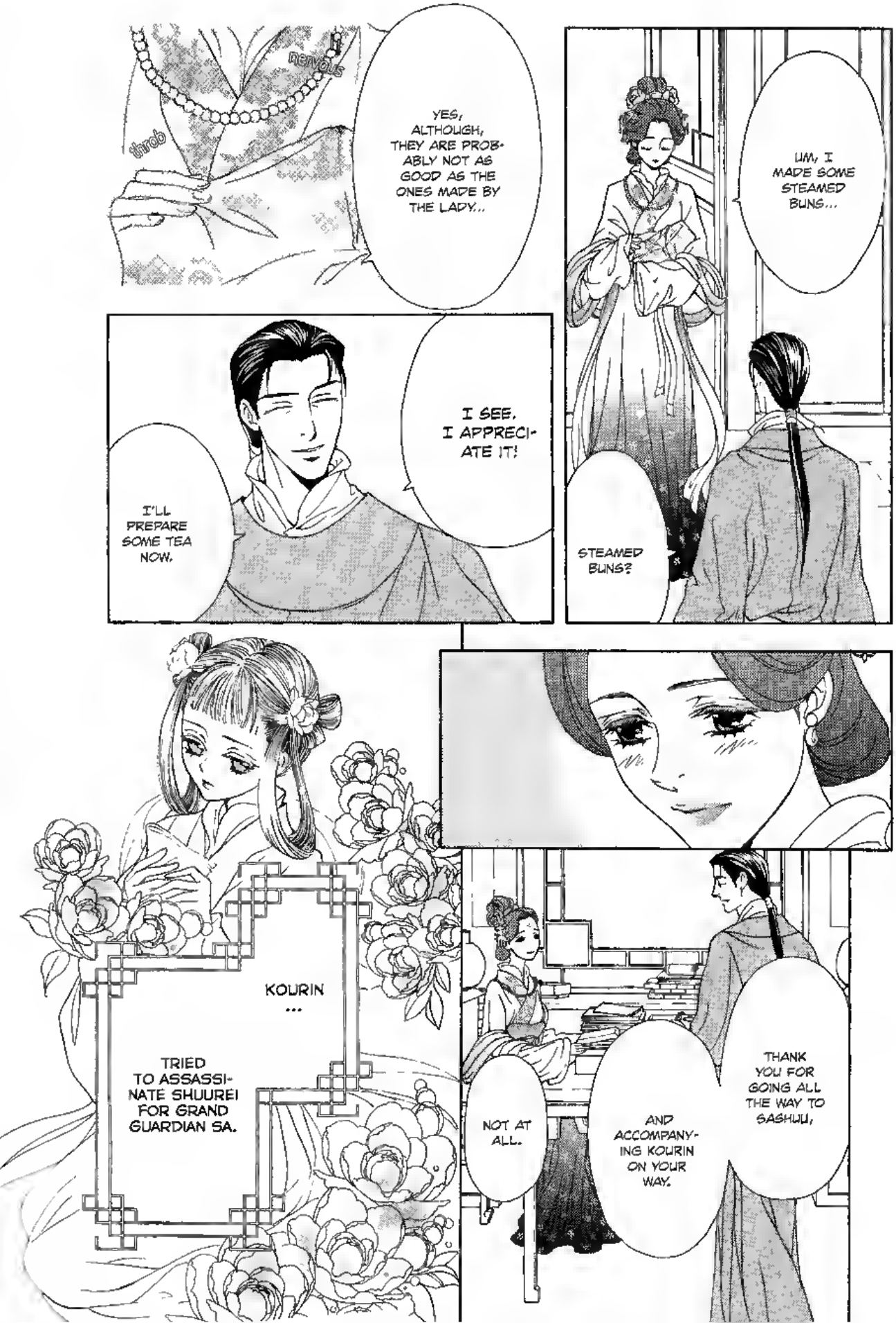
OH YEAH, HOW ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR DRAFT, YOUR HIGHNESS?
AH, PLEASE WAIT A LITTLE LONGER, I'M STILL PROOFREADING IT.
YOUR HIGHNESS, IT'S OBVIOUS YOU SIMPLY WANT TO KEEP SHUREI-DONO CLOSE BY. WHY ARE YOU GOING ABOUT IT SO INDIRECTLY?
DON'T YOU THINK THAT'S THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY?
YOU COULD JUST ORDER HER TO MOVE INTO THE PALACE. THAT'S HOW YOU SHOULD HANDLE IT.
REALLY?
SHUREI LEFT THE INNER PALACE VOLUNTARILY..
I DO NOT CONCUR.
That also means she has no desire to remain close to me...
THAT MEANS SHE HAS NO DESIRE TO REMAIN IN THE PALACE.

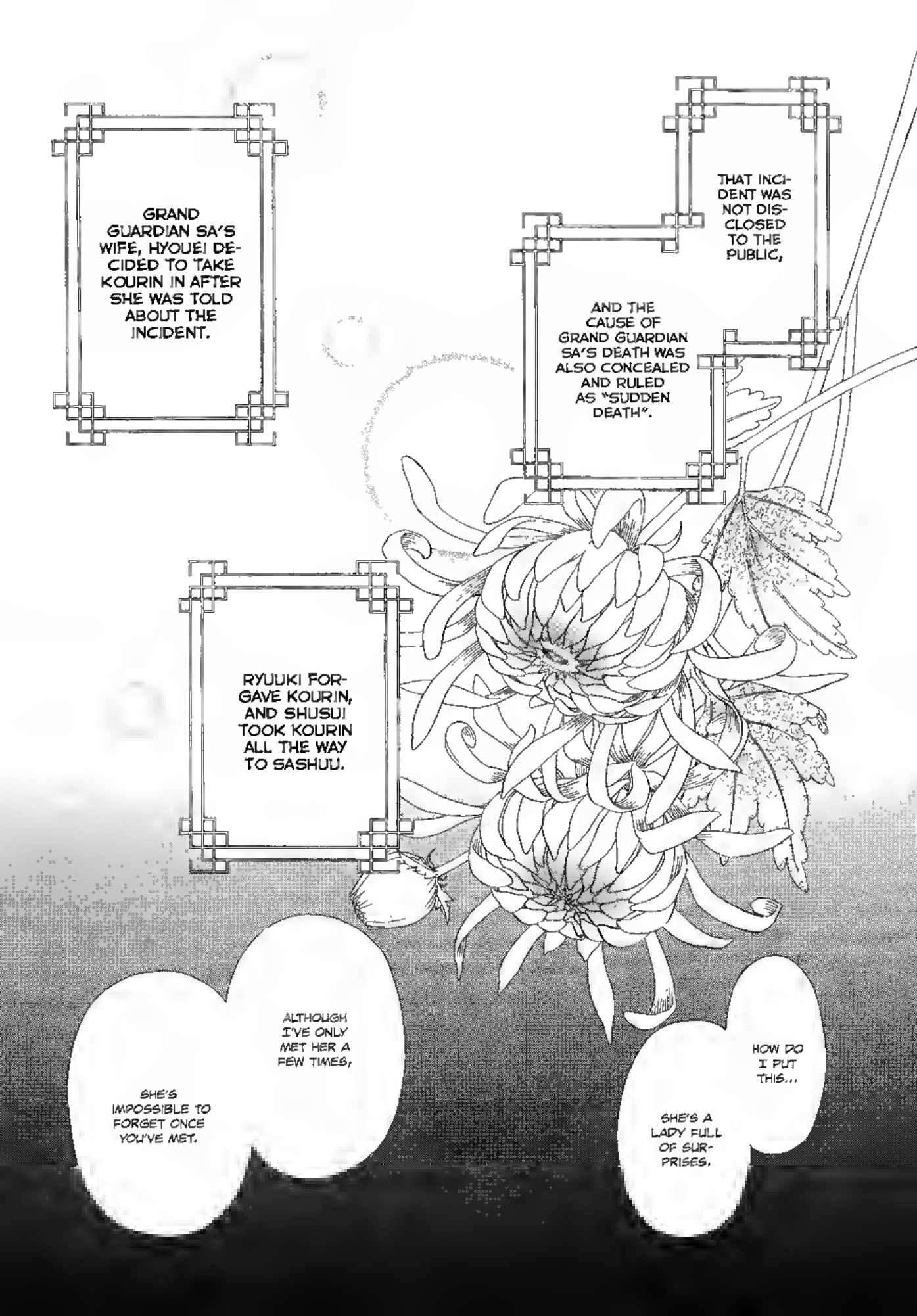
SO, IF I FORCEFULLY ORDER HER TO MOVE BACK INTO THE PALACE, SHE'D GET ANGRY FOR SURE.
SHE OFTEN GOT ANGRY WITH YOU IN SPRINGTIME, DIDN'T SHE?
BUT I THINK THAT'S DIFFER-ENT...
SHUUREI IS VERY KIND...
...EVEN WHEN SHE WAS ANGRY, SHE WAS STILL KIND.
I BELIEVE THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT CAN BE FORGIVEN, AND OTHERS THAT CANNOT.
ALTHOUGH IT'D BE EASIER TO ORDER HER TO MOVE BACK INTO THE PALACE...
And I was happy for that...
BECAUSE SHE WAS ANGRY FOR MY SAKE.
BUT...
...Back then...
...I FEEL LIKE SOME-THING WILL BE SHAT-TERED.

Absolutely none!
Shourei has no desire to return to the palace.
So, you understand it clearly.


And that's precisely why he's chosen to do everything in a roundabout way and wait...
Without interfering with the girl's own free will, but gradually winning her back...
If he summons her back into the palace as the Emperor...
...Then I'm afraid what he has been wishing for all this time will just slip out of his grasp for good.
Although he has no idea himself what he's been doing
He may be even better at capturing hearts than I am...

...As if I'm one to talk...
But for a beginner, he's chosen a fairly formidable foe.
PLEASE EXCUSE ME,
SHOUKA-SAMA.
PLEASE COME IN.


nervous
throb
YES, ALTHOUGH, THEY ARE PROBABLY NOT AS GOOD AS THE ONES MADE BY THE LADY...
UM, I MADE SOME STEAMED BUNS...
STEAMED BUNS?
I SEE. I APPRECIATE IT!
I'LL PREPARE SOME TEA NOW.
KOURIN ...
TRIED TO ASSASSINATE SHUUREI FOR GRAND GUARDIAN SA.
THANK YOU FOR GOING ALL THE WAY TO SASHUU,
AND ACCOMPANYING KOURIN ON YOUR WAY.
NOT AT ALL.


GRAND GUARDIAN SA'S WIFE, HYOUEI DECIDED TO TAKE KOURIN IN AFTER SHE WAS TOLD ABOUT THE INCIDENT.
THAT INCIDENT WAS NOT DISCLOSED TO THE PUBLIC,
AND THE CAUSE OF GRAND GUARDIAN SA'S DEATH WAS ALSO CONCEALED AND RULED AS "SUDDEN DEATH".
RYUUKI FORGAVE KOURIN, AND SHUSUI TOOK KOURIN ALL THE WAY TO SASHUU.
ALTHOUGH I'VE ONLY MET HER A FEW TIMES,
SHE'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET ONCE YOU'VE MET.
HOW DO I PUT THIS...
SHE'S A LADY FULL OF SURPRISES.

NO WORRIES.
SHE LOVED GRAND GUARDIAN SA JUST AS MUCH AS, NO, EVEN MORE THAN KOURIN DID.
PLUS SHE'S VERY STRONG, SO KOURIN WILL DO JUST FINE UNDER HER TUTE-LAGE.
YEAH, KOURIN WILL SURELY BE ABLE TO RECOVER UNDER HYOUE!'S GUIDANCE.
OR AT LEAST, THAT'S MY HOPE.
YES.
SO, HOKUTO-SAN...
YES? WHAT ABOUT HIM?

As a member of the "Wind Wolves" (Kaze no Ookami), he has walked on many dark paths. He and his comrades have saved each other's lives countless times.
Hokuto means Big Dipper.
After disbanding the "Wind Wolves", he set his eyes on some place far away, and disappeared just like the wind.
He's an irreplaceable comrade, and a friend.

HUH?

...SEVERAL MONTHS AGO...
HE PASSED AWAY... FROM DISEASE...

"I'll come visit you some time, so until then don't come."
I thought I should just wait then...
In all that time, I received only one letter from him.
HE DIED?
He supposedly settled in Sashuu...
...For however long...
HE DEPARTED PEACEFULLY UNDER HIS CHILDREN'S WATCH AND CARE.
DISEASE?
A DISEASE? IN THE PAST, HE USED TO ALWAYS LAUGH ABOUT HOW IMPOSSIBLE THAT'D BE.
SO, HE HAD CHILDREN?
THERE WERE TWO BOYS, BUT I BELIEVE THEY WERE HIS STEP-SONS.
HIS WIFE PASSED AWAY WHEN THE BOYS WERE STILL YOUNG.

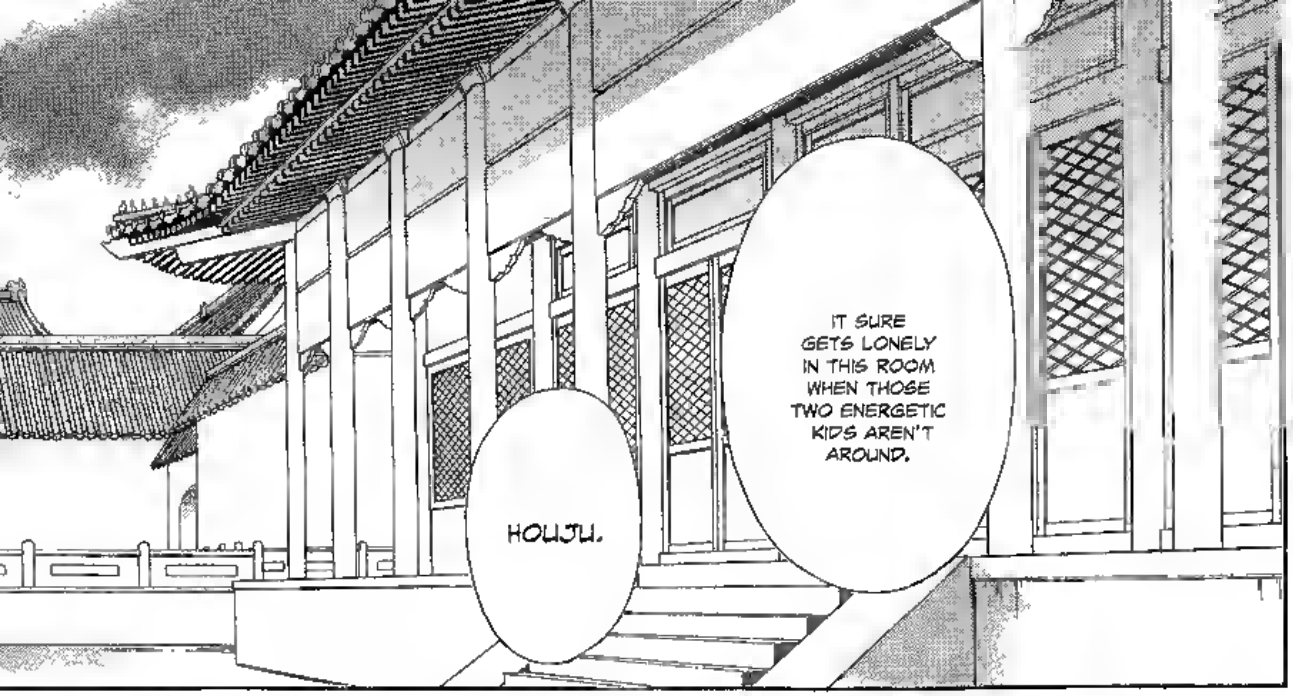
I see.
"I don't think my death would be an easy one!"
HOKUTO WAS UNDER THE CARE OF HIS CHIL-DREN...
"To kill and to be killed, is how I live."
He always had ambition in his eyes...
His laughter was always spontaneous—
...That man...
Probably...
TIME... IS SUCH A MIGHTY FORCE.
His eyes at the end of his journey...

TIME FLIES ... I'M ALMOST FORTY.
I MUST LOOK LIKE A DRIED-UP OLD MAN IN YOUR EYES, RIGHT?
N-NOT AT ALL!
gasp
YOU'RE STILL YOUNG, AND COOL...
I MEAN ...
AH, NO...
HAS IT ALREADY BEEN ALMOST TWENTY YEARS...
...SINCE THE "WIND WOLVES" DISBANDED?
AH, PLEASE, TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT'S WRITTEN INSIDE.
Huh?
And it was carelessly left here...
SHOUKA-SAN, ISN'T THIS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT?
THE PAPER IS OF VERY HIGH QUALITY.
spread
Is that really okay?

THIS... SHOUKA-SAMA...
IT'S ... AN INVITATION ... FOR SHUUREI-SAN ... TO YOBAI...? ...AM I READING THIS RIGHT?
YEAH, THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT, TOO.
ISN'T IT INTEREST-ING?
HE MUST MERELY BE TRYING TO SNEAK IN HERE FOR DINNER.
Pouring
Water
YEAH... THAT'S WHAT'S WRITTEN DOWN TOO...
AND YOU'RE FINE WITH IT?!
BUT ... WHAT IF...?
glance
close

BUT, SEIRAN WILL ALSO BE HERE...
...ALONG WITH ANOTHER GUARD.
WHAT?
shaking
Your Highness, please don't rush yourself into trouble.
THEN, EVEN THOUGH HE'S THE EMPEROR,
I'D STILL KICK HIM OUT!
HE STAYS HERE BECAUSE HE HAS A LOT OF BUSINESS TO TAKE CARE OF.
BUT, HE'S DEFINITELY STRONGER THAN SEIRAN.
WHO MIGHT HE BE?
I AM CONVINCED NOW AFTER LISTENING TO YOUR STORY.
PLEASE, LET'S HAVE SOME TEA!

smiling
SO SHUSUI,
PLEASE TELL ME WHAT CONDITION SASHUU IS IN NOW.
gulping
OKAY! ♡
smiling
THAT DAY, ALONG WITH HER LOVE FOR SHOUKA, AS WELL AS HER WILLPOWER, SHUSUI...
...DRANK MANY CUPS OF "DADDY'S TEA", FROM WHICH EVEN SHOUKA'S OWN DAUGHTER WOULD IMMEDIATELY RUN FOR HER LIFE.


IT SURE GETS LONELY IN THIS ROOM WHEN THOSE TWO ENERGETIC KIDS AREN'T AROUND.
HOUJU.

DO NOT CALL ME BY THAT NAME.
WHY NOT? IT'S JUST THE TWO OF US RIGHT NOW.

WE'VE KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR MORE THAN 10 YEARS.
I JUST CAN'T GET MYSELF TO CALL YOU BY THAT ABSURD NAME, "KIJIN".
...

CAN'T WE JUST TALK TO ASSISTANT MINISTER RI AND ASK HIM TO LET THOSE TWO STAY HERE FOREVER?
EVEN IF ENSEI-SAN CAN'T STAY FOREVER, AT LEAST LET SHUU-KUN STAY...
IT'S THE SAME TREASURE CHAMBER, BUT WHEN I HAVE TO GO THERE BY MYSELF, IT FEELS WEIRD FOR SOME REASON.
...
WHY?
NO, THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE.
HAVE YOU REALLY NOT FIGURED IT OUT YET?
FIGURED OUT WHAT?
WHAT'S THE MATTER?
HMM...
YOU JUST HAD A REALLY SURPRISED LOOK ON YOUR FACE, HOUJU.

getting up
NO, FORGET IT.
?
DO YOU STILL REMEMBER WHEN THE EMPEROR SUDDENLY PROPOSED TO ALLOW WOMEN TO TAKE NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS?
OF COURSE I DO.
YOU LEFT WITHOUT A WORD.
I HAD TO DO A LOT OF EXPLAINING FOR YOU THAT DAY.
SORRY ABOUT THAT...
NAH, I'M ALREADY USED TO IT...
...
cutting to the chase
THERE'S SOMETHING ON MY MIND RIGHT NOW.
COULD IT BE ABOUT THE MINISTER OF PERSONNEL?
HOW IS IT THAT YOU ALWAYS SEE THROUGH EVERYTHING?

I WAS SURPRISED THAT THE MINISTER OF PERSONNEL DIDN'T OBJECT AT THAT TIME.
BUT, OF COURSE, HE DIDN'T ACTIVELY SUPPORT IT EITHER.
IT'S BECAUSE I WAS WITH YOU EVEN BEFORE YOU STARTED WEARING THAT MASK. SO, I UNDERSTAND YOU FAIRLY WELL NOW.
ARE YOU KIDDING ME?! "FRIEND"?!
"SHITHEAD" FITS THAT MAN PERFECTLY!
clench
MAYBE THAT SHITHEAD KNOWS SOMETHING WE DON'T.
I give up...
Yikes!
Yikes!
CATCH THEM!
THEY'RE RUNNING THAT WAY!
DESPITE YOUR USUAL CALMNESS, AS SOON AS THE MINISTER OF PERSONNEL IS MENTIONED...
sigh
"SHITHEAD"...? HE IS ONE OF THE FEW FRIENDS YOU HAVE WHO CAN LOOK STRAIGHT AT YOUR UNMASKED FACE.

BANG!!
Yikes!
Yikes!
WHY IS IT SO NOISY OUTSIDE?
MAYBE THE HUNTING DOGS GOT LOOSE?
EEK!
Two boys wearing all black?

...How very suspicious...
HOW COULD WE HAVE GOTTEN CAUGHT SO SOON? OUR PLAN WAS PERFECT!
dammit!
EVEN THOUGH WE SPENT ALL OUR MONEY BUYING THESE BRAND-NEW ALL-BLACK OUTFITS, HOW?
SO... WHERE IS THIS PLACE?
I THINK WE'RE BECOMING MORE AND MORE TRAPPED IN THIS PLACE.
...
OH SHIT!

"MYSTERIOUS"...?
"MASKED MAN"...?
BOSS, THAT'S FOR WHEN YOU RUN INTO A BEAR!
OH, RIGHT.. THEN FOR A MYSTERIOUS MASKED MAN, YOU NEED TO... OH YEAH!
YOUSHUN! NOW WOULD BE A GOOD TIME TO PLAY DEAD!
AT THIS PLACE?! A MYSTERIOUS MASKED MAN?!
collapse
Rolling down
Ah...
HOUJU...
USE SALT!
Sfx: sploosh!

BUT BOSS, ISN'T THAT FOR WHEN YOU RUN INTO A GHOST OR A SLUG?
CLOSE ENOUGH!
BUT, HE'S AN IDIOT WITHOUT ANY COMMON SENSE TO COME OUT IN BROAD DAYLIGHT.
...
Wipe away
Though it's quite rare these days.
He's angry!
He's angry!
Sfx heartbeats

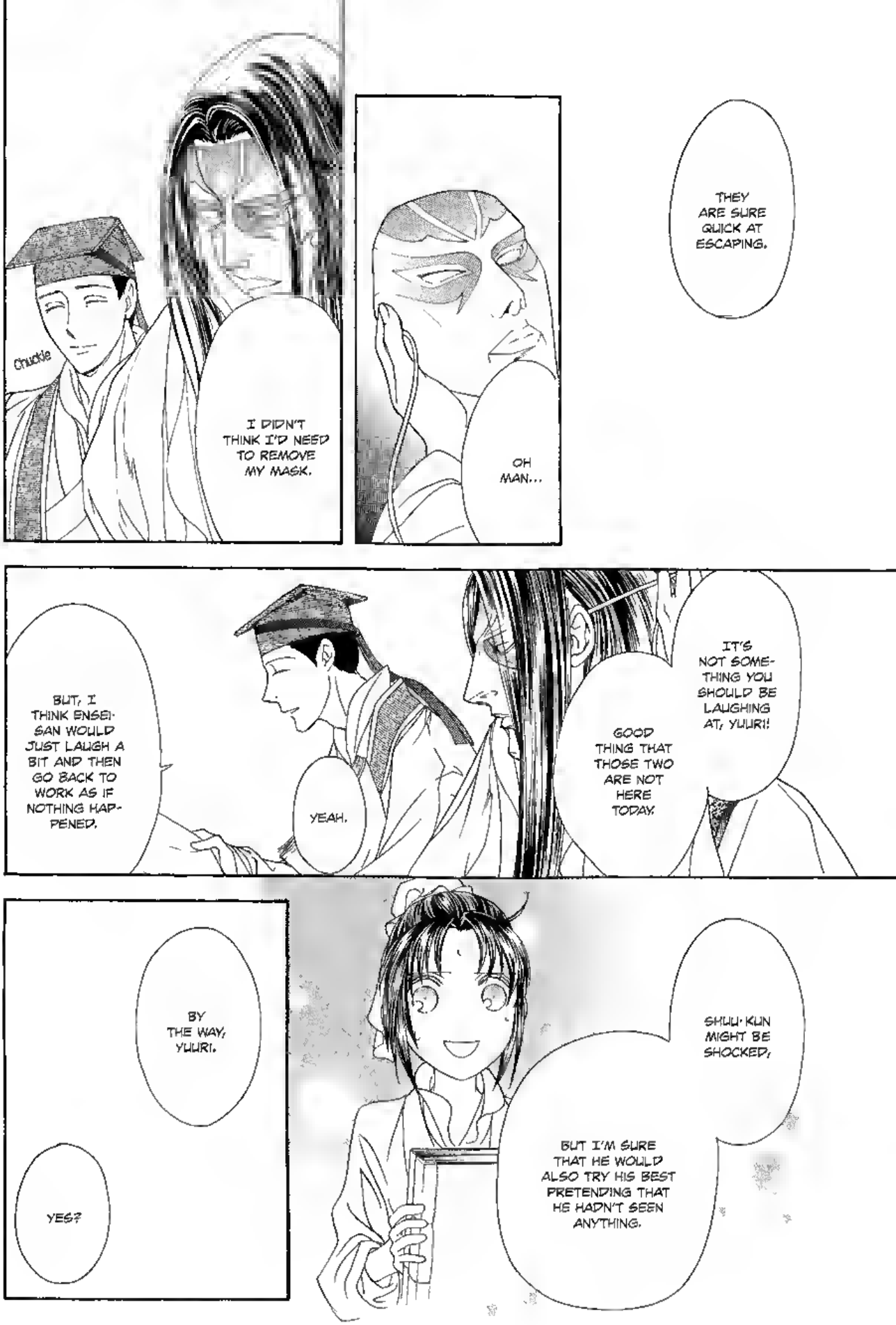
LET ME GIVE YOU SOME ADVICE, BOTH OF YOU.
IT'S BETTER FOR YOU TO GET CAUGHT BY THE GUARDS RIGHT NOW.
BOSS! I DON'T THINK IT'S WORKING AT ALL!
THEN, HOW ABOUT SUGAR OR CHILI PEPPERS?
drip, drip
SO, YOU'VE FINALLY DECIDED TO SHOW YOURSELF, MYSTERIOUS...
Aah!
NO, YOU MUSTN'T!

BANG!
BOOM!
... MASKED ...
MAN...?
freeze
whoosh!

rustle
rustle
HOUJU!
Ah!
YOU'RE A QIGONG MASTER...
PLEASE GO EASY ON THEM!

dazzled
rubbing
DON'T LOOK HIM IN THE EYE!
THIS IS BAD! HE'S TRYING TO PETRIFY US!
SIGH...
YOU SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOUR MASK ON!
ah
vein popping
quickly disperse
I THINK SO TOO! WE SHOULD JUST RUN AWAY NOW, RIGHT?
NOT GOOD! WE ARE DEAD MEAT IF HE FIGHTS US, YOUSHUN!
DON'T INSULT OTHER PEOPLE'S FACES!
AM I SOME KIND OF SCARY BEAST OR SOMETHING?

dash
CAN'T YOU CALL IT A "STRATEGIC RETREAT" INSTEAD?
GOT IT!
running away
AH!
bump
silence...
...


Chuckle
I DIDN'T THINK I'D NEED TO REMOVE MY MASK.
OH MAN...
THEY ARE SURE QUICK AT ESCAPING.
BUT, I THINK ENSEI-SAN WOULD JUST LAUGH A BIT AND THEN GO BACK TO WORK AS IF NOTHING HAP-PENED.
YEAH.
GOOD THING THAT THOSE TWO ARE NOT HERE TODAY.
IT'S NOT SOME-THING YOU SHOULD BE LAUGHING AT, YUURI!
BY THE WAY, YUURI.
YES?
SHUU-KUN MIGHT BE SHOCKED,
BUT I'M SURE THAT HE WOULD ALSO TRY HIS BEST PRETENDING THAT HE HADN'T SEEN ANYTHING.

YEAH, SINCE I WAS PLANNING ON A SCHEDULED CHECK.
WHAAAAT?
I THOUGHT YOU HAD THE KEY TO THE TREASURE CHAMBER ON YOUR WAIST?
HE WAS HOLDING SOMETHING VERY SIMILAR IN HIS HAND.
THAT BOY PROBABLY SNATCHED IT WHEN HE BUMPED INTO YOU.
WH... WHERE COULD IT..?
NO NO NO NO
IT'S GONE!
NO!
IT'S NO USE LOOKING FOR IT NOW.
rattling
ARE YOU KIDDING ME...?
rattling
rattling

HOW COULD YOU BE SO CALM ABOUT IT?
THERE'S ONLY ONE COPY OF THAT KEY IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY, AND THAT'S THE ONE!

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE FOR DINNER?
OH! ALL RIGHT!
SO THAT YOU'LL KEEP QUIET ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED, I'LL TAKE REQUESTS THIS TIME.

I GUESS I WANT SOME MOUNTAIN VEGETABLES, LIKE MUSHROOMS OR CABBAGE.
You can cook them however you want.
YOU SURE AREN'T ASKING MUCH. IS THAT REALLY ALL RIGHT?
LET'S JUST BUY WHATEVER WE CAN FIND THEN.
WAIT, LOOK.

collapse
OH, NO!
gasp
Those two...
ONE JUST COL-LAPSED!
swaying
THERE ARE TWO WEIRD LOOKING PEOPLE OVER THERE.
IN THE MIDDLE OF SUMMER, IN THAT KIND OF OUTFIT...
UNSTEADY
YOUS-HUN!
Y-YOU-SHUN!
DASHING
WAIT, PRIN-CESS!
STOP SHAKING HIM.
OF COURSE, SHE'S NOT LISTENING.
Sigh.

IT'S HEAT-STROKE.
JUST WHAT ARE YOU TWO THINKING WEARING SOMETHING LIKE THIS IN THIS KIND OF HOT WEATHER...?
YOU TOO! TAKE OFF YOUR SHIRT NOW.
WHAT'S HIS NAME?
YOUSHUN.
YOUSHUN-KUN,
YOUSHUN-KUN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?
AH.
YEAH.
Good! Looks like he's still conscious.

YOU WOULDN'T HAPPEN TO HAVE ANY SALT ON YOU, WOULD YOU?
ACTUALLY, I DO!
AH!
Mysterious? Masked man...?
It can't be...
OH, SHOOT! I THREW ALL OF IT AT THAT MYSTERIOUS MASKED MAN!
CRESTFALLEN
PRINCESS,
I got some from the house over there.
SALT WATER.
ENSEI! THANKS A BUNCH!
ENSEI, COULD YOU CARRY HIM TO OUR HOUSE?
I THINK IT'S BETTER TO GET A DOCTOR TO TAKE A LOOK AT HIM.
YOUSHUN-KUN, CAN YOU DRINK?
gulping

MY HOUSE IS CLOSER.
Huh?

Wow!
How ex-
ceptionally
beautiful!

The way he pulls up the child is also so elegant...
peel
A-a man?
AMAZ-ING...
YOU'RE THAT MYSTERI-OUS...!
gasp
CLARE!
F-FINE...
SHUT UP IF YOU WANNA SAVE THIS KID!

SSSS
?!
DID YOU MANAGE TO FINISH EVERY-THING I AS-SIGNED YOU?
REALLY? OH, OKAY!
I'LL GET A CART! HERE, YOU HOLD HIM!
It can't be!
Blanking out...

2ND ANNIVERSARY

WE ARE TWO!

NE HAVE WEATHERED MUCN BRETNREN LEADERE TNAT REFUEE TO EEE REAEON, DIEAPPEARING STAFF AND EOME CRAZY AEE MOMOE. THROUGN IT ALL, WE HAVE ETUCK TOGETNER AND OVERCOME AND KEFT OURELVES AFLOAT BECAUEE WE NEITNOR RETREAT NOR EURRENDER. I HOFE FOR MANY, MANY MORE YEARS OF MARATNON OCS, UNREAEONABLE DEAD-LINEE AND GENERAL ENENANIGANE. EFE-CIAL THANKE TO ALL OUR ETAFF FOR MAKING THIE POEEIBLE. LET UE CON-GRATULATE OURELVEE NITH COTTON CANDY AE WE VE CHIEVED NO EAEY FEAT. CNERRY UERAINBONSTAR, I NIEN YOU A PPY BIRTNDAY! DBAEANE 4 EVA YO!

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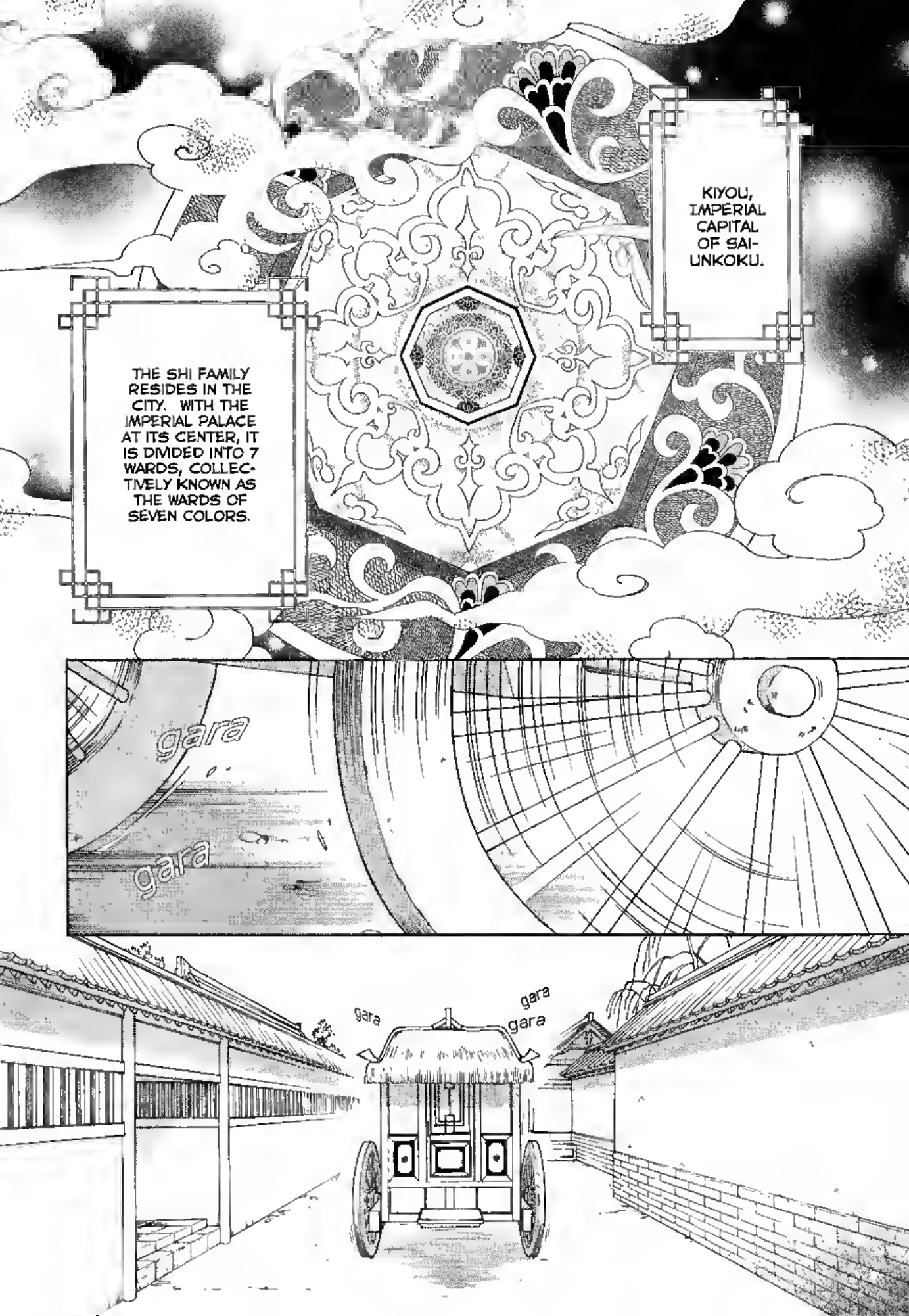
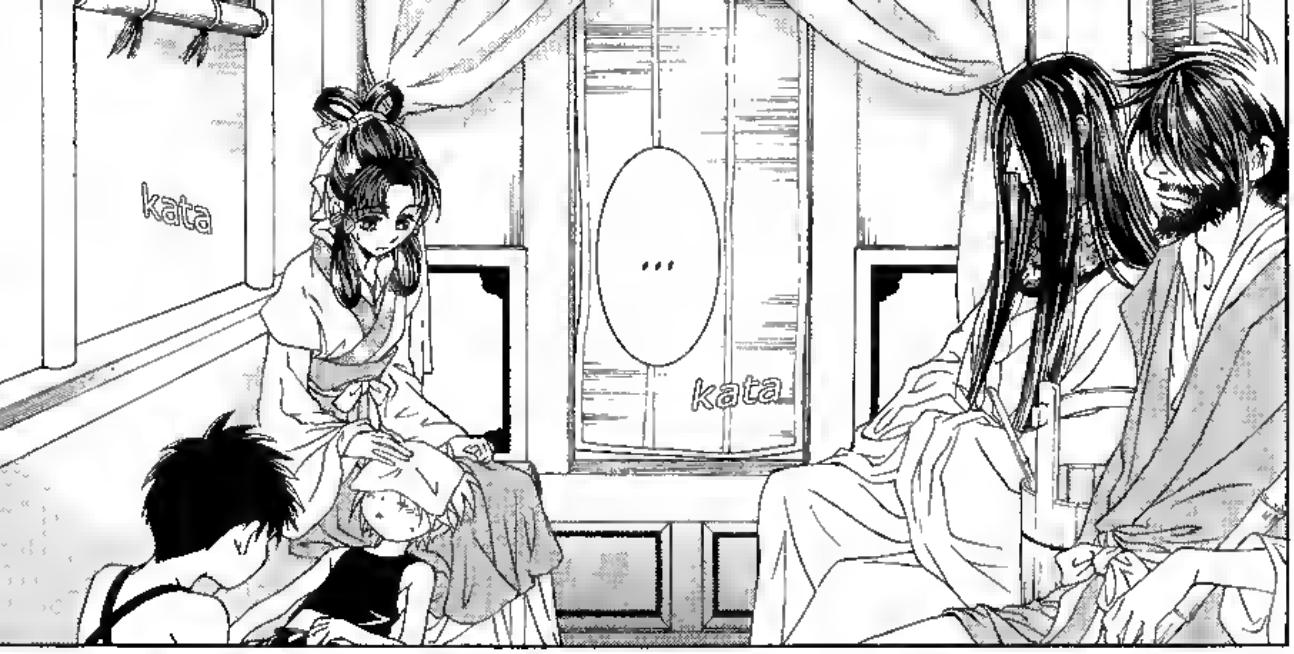
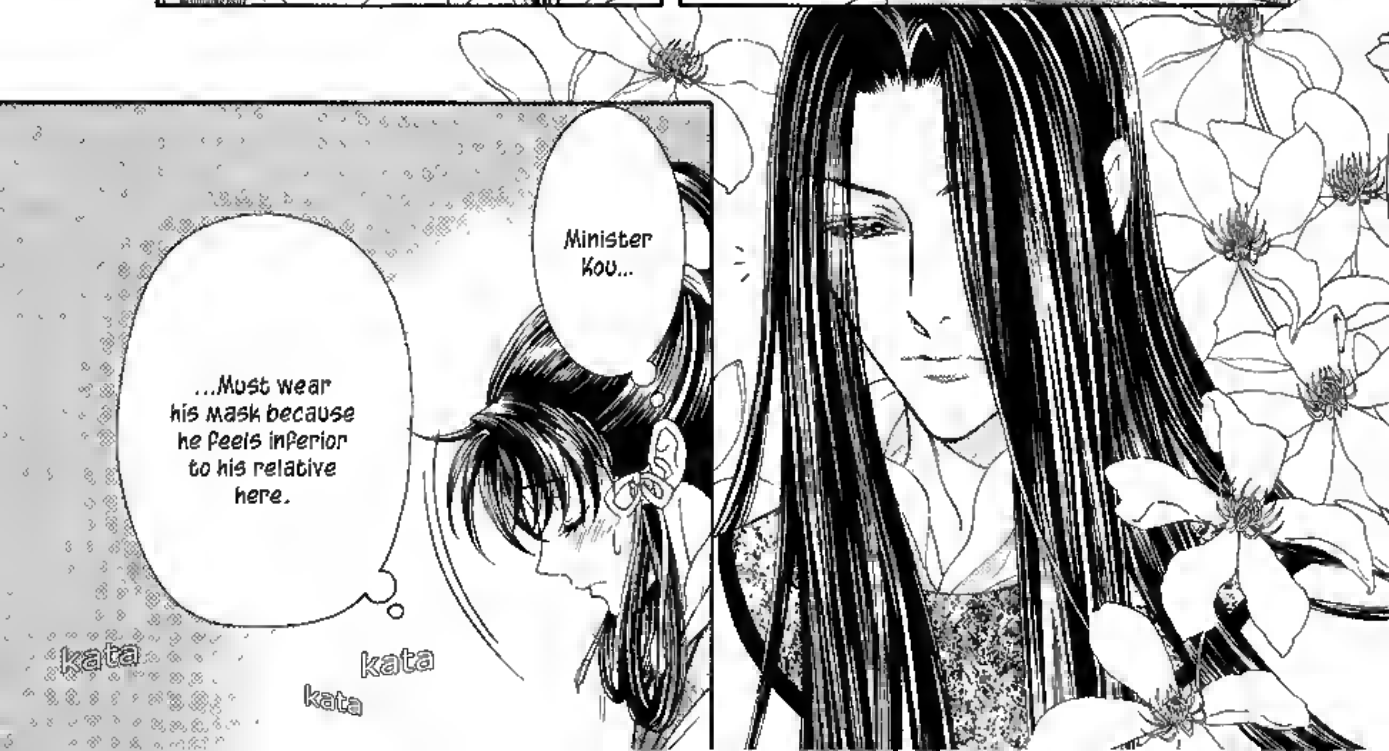
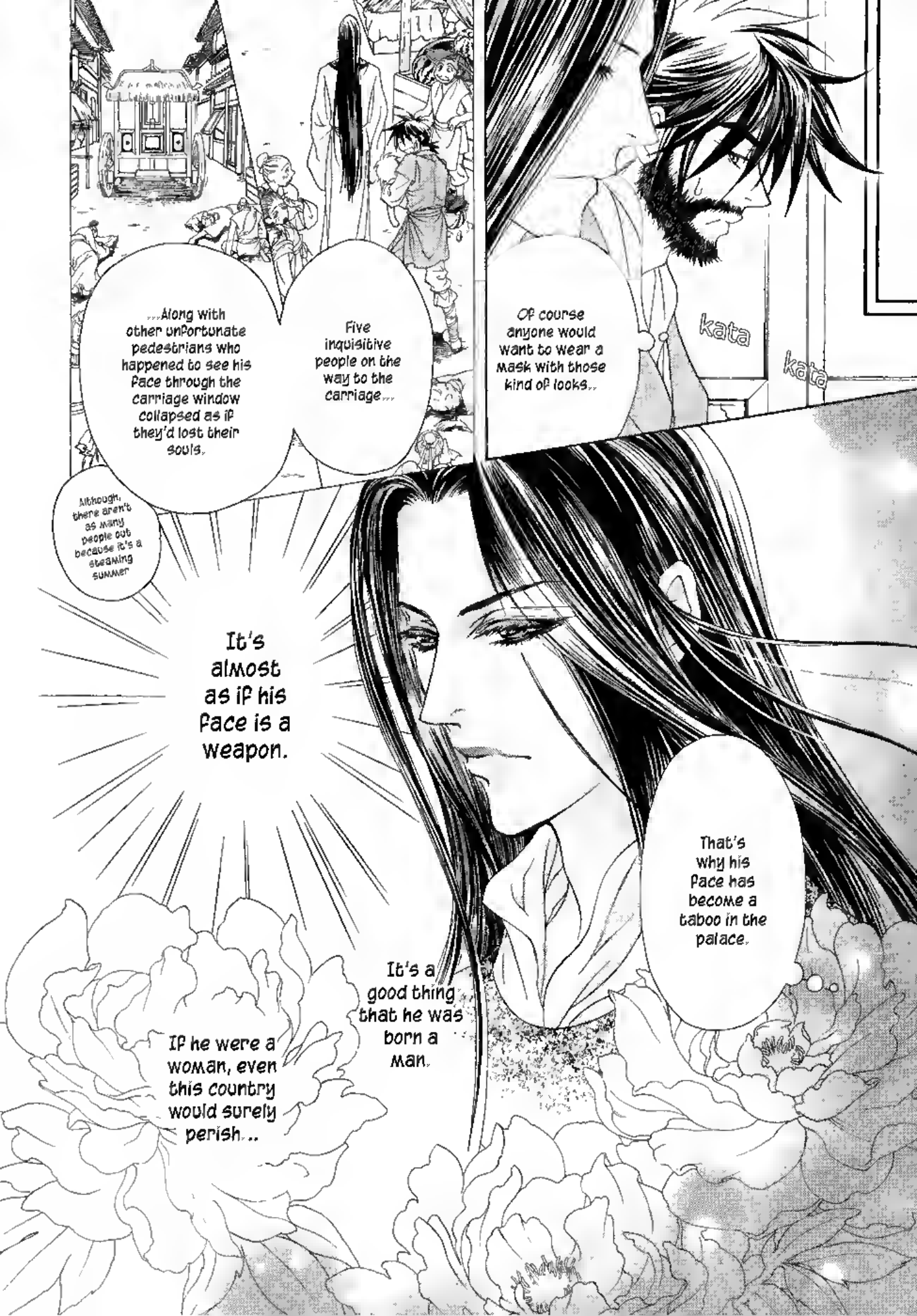
第14話


KIYOU, IMPERIAL CAPITAL OF SAI-UNKOKU.
THE SHI FAMILY RESIDES IN THE CITY. WITH THE IMPERIAL PALACE AT ITS CENTER, IT IS DIVIDED INTO 7 WARDS, COLLECTIVELY KNOWN AS THE WARDS OF SEVEN COLORS.
gara
gara
gara
gara
gara



*Note: Koutou means Eastern (Tou) Yellow (Kou)




kata
kata
Of course anyone would want to wear a mask with those kind of looks...
Five inquisitive people on the way to the carriage...
...Along with other unfortunate pedestrians who happened to see his face through the carriage window collapsed as if they'd lost their souls.
Although, there aren't as many people out because it's a steaming summer
It's almost as if his face is a weapon.
That's why his face has become a taboo in the palace.
It's a good thing that he was born a man.
If he were a woman, even this country would surely perish...

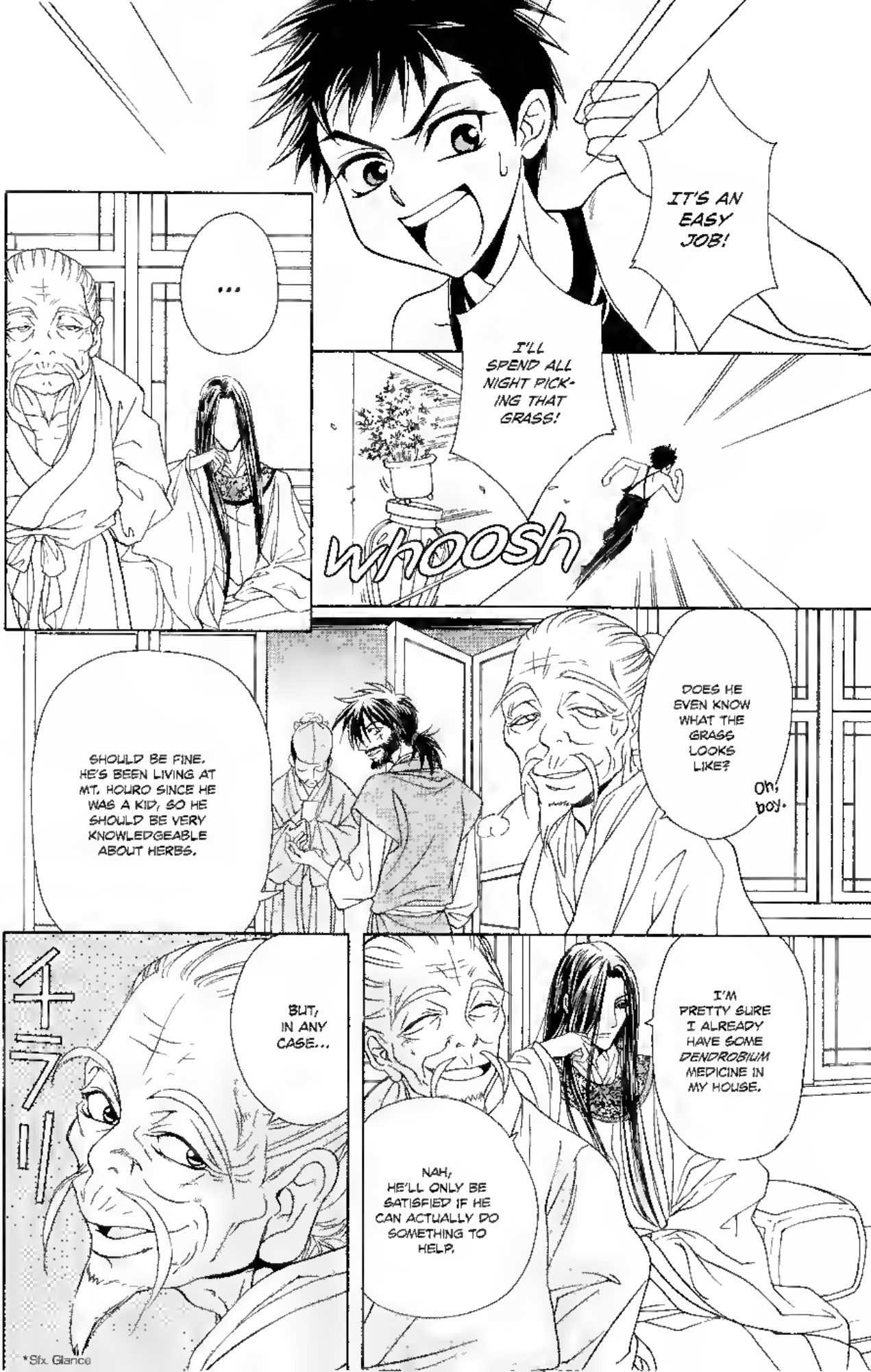
FOLLOW ME.
Huh? Is this the back door?
I HAVE ALREADY SENT A MESSENGER AHEAD.
SO, THERE SHOULD BE A DOCTOR ALREADY WAITING THERE.
Eh?
That's...
AH, ISN'T THAT SHUUREI-CHAN?

YEAH, HE WAS MY DOCTOR WHEN I WAS LITTLE.
AN ACQUAINTANCE OF YOURS, HIME-CHAN?
ho ho ho
YOU-SENSEI!
AND I'LL NEED A LITTLE HELP FROM SHUUREI-CHAN, TOO.
OKAY.
OH, IS THAT THE KID?
I'VE ALREADY MADE ARRANGEMENTS, SO JUST TAKE HIM INTO THAT ROOM.
AH, GOT IT, GOT IT!
PLEASE WAIT LIKE A GOOD CHILD.
PLEASE, PLEASE SAVE HIS LIFE!
YOUS-HUN!
PLEASE HELP YOUS-HUN!
MR. DOCTOR!

I HAVE TO ASK...
HOW'D YOU KNOW MY NAME?
YO, YOU THERE...
...SHOURIN, CORRECT?
DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE PERSON YOU'RE GOING AFTER, YOU IDIOTS!
WHAT DID YOU TWO COME HERE FOR?
Look here!
CRAP! I SPENT SO MUCH TIME SIGHTSEEING THAT I COMPLETELY FORGOT! AH!!
THAT'S WHAT I FIGURED WOULD HAPPEN.
AHHH! Y-YOU!!
The man with a cross-shaped scar on his left cheek!

...
SO, WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO NOW? TRY TO CAPTURE ME?
...SINCE YOU GUYS ARE TRYING TO SAVE YOUSHUN'S LIFE RIGHT NOW,
WE WERE ONCE TOLD BY OUR FATHER THAT WE MUST NEVER RE-QUITE KIND-NESS WITH ENMITY.
piop
...I WON'T...
ARE YOU SURE YOU AREN'T MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT THIS FATHER OF YOURS SAID?
WHAT DID YOU SAY?!
OKAY, JOB'S DONE!
ton
ton

...That was Past.
MR. DOCTOR, DON'T TELL ME THAT IT'S ALREADY TOO LATE TO SAVE YOUSHUN...
NAH, EVERYTHING'S JUST FINE.
Hah?
LUCKILY, IT WASN'T A SEVERE CASE OF HEATSTROKE.
YOU DON'T NEED TO COMFORT ME LIKE THAT! I'M A MAN! I CAN TAKE IT!
...
JUST TELL ME THE TRUTH!
MR. DOCTOR!!
JUST HOW BAD IS IT?
shake
shake
W-what should I do?
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO SAVE HIM!
PLEASE TELL ME!
yes!
THERE'S THIS PERENNIAL GRASS NAMED DENDROBIUM GROWING ON THE HILLS AT THE BACK OF THE HOUSE. IT MAKES VERY EFFECTIVE HERBAL MEDICINE...
YOUSHUN COULD DIE ANY MINUTE NOW, COULDN'T HE?!
Oh, nooo!


IT'S AN EASY JOB!
I'LL SPEND ALL NIGHT PICKING THAT GRASS!
whoosh
...
DOES HE EVEN KNOW WHAT THE GRASS LOOKS LIKE?
Oh, boy.
SHOULD BE FINE. HE'S BEEN LIVING AT MT. HOURO SINCE HE WAS A KID, SO HE SHOULD BE VERY KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT HERBS.
I'M PRETTY SURE I ALREADY HAVE SOME *DENDROBIUM* MEDICINE IN MY HOUSE.
NAH, HE'LL ONLY BE SATISFIED IF HE CAN ACTUALLY DO SOMETHING TO HELP.
BUT, IN ANY CASE...
チラ!!
*Sfx. Glance

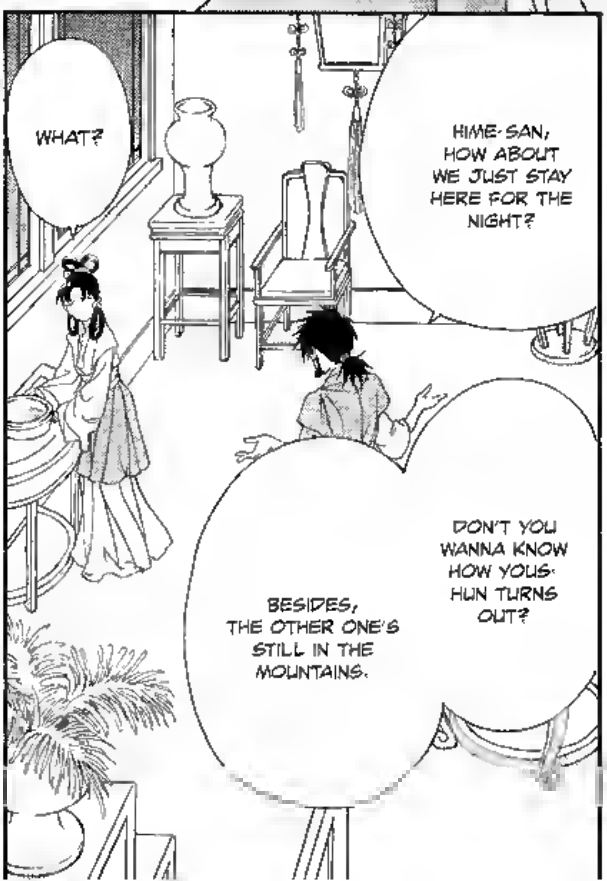
No breasts.
BUT, WHY AREN'T YOU A GIRL?
love struck
I CAME TO TREAT A PATIENT, BUT HAD NO IDEA THAT I WOULD HAVE THE CHANCE TO MEET SUCH A BEAUTY.
UP UNTIL THIS POINT IN MY LONG LIFE, I HAVEN'T SEEN ONE MORE BEAUTIFUL AS YOU.
angry glare
IT'S A REALLY BAD IDEA TO KNOCK THE DOCTOR OUT.
Right?
YOU KNOW ME TOO WELL.
Yikes!
Huh?
Sweep
WHOA!!
hehe
hehe

NO, YOU MUSTN'T!
I'm getting excited.
EVEN YOUR VIOLENT SIDE IS CHARMING!

Sfx ooo [whoooaaaa!]
おおお
WHAT?! YOU WERE TRYING TO KNOCK ME OUT?

RESPECT

How does Assistant Minister Kei normally stop him?
He's actually a very belligerent person.


WHAT?
HIME-SAN, HOW ABOUT WE JUST STAY HERE FOR THE NIGHT?
DON'T YOU WANNA KNOW HOW YOUSHUN TURNS OUT?
BESIDES, THE OTHER ONE'S STILL IN THE MOUNTAINS.

AH, ENSEI!
I THINK WE'LL BE HOME VERY LATE TODAY. I'LL NEED TO SEND A LETTER HOME...
What to do for dinner...

I'VE ALREADY ACTUALLY SENT A LETTER SAYING THAT WE'LL BE STAYING HERE TONIGHT.
OF COURSE, BUT...
I APOLO-GIZE!
FOR-GIVE ME!
SORRY!
It's because your house is pretty run-down compared to this one here.
WHAT?! HOW COULD YOU?!
THE OWNER OF THE HOUSE ALSO HAPPILY SAID WE COULD STAY.
...
...REALLY?

I'M TERRIBLY SORRY TO IMPOSE, MISTER.
I SHALL HUMBLY ACCEPT YOUR GENEROUS OFFER AND TRY NOT TO BE TOO MUCH OF A BOTHER.

...WELL, I GUESS IT CAN'T BE HELPED IF YOU'VE ALREADY SENT THE LETTER...
You're actually that pleased, aren't you?

EXACTLY WHEN DID I CONSENT TO THIS?
ENSEI!
chill

SHUUREI-CHAN, COME HERE FOR A 'SEC.
OKAY.

WELL, ENSEI, DON'T BE RUDE, OKAY?
O-KAY!

UM,, HEHEHE,,, JUST NOW ,,, SO BE A GOOD HOST TO US, PLEASE?
LET ME SEE, IF I CAUSE ANY TROUBLE AT SHOUKA'S HOUSE, I'LL END UP GETTING SLAUGHTERED.
AFTER THAT BIG COMMOTION IN THE STREET, I WAS ALSO FOUND OUT BY THE "OTHER GUYS", SO TONIGHT MIGHT JUST BE THE BIG FINALE.
WHY?
IN OTHER WORDS, WE'RE GOING TO HAVE SOME "VISITORS" TONIGHT?
WELL,,, SOMETHING LIKE THAT.
THIS PLACE IS HUGE, IT CAN WITHSTAND DAMAGE BECAUSE THE OWNER'S WEALTHY, AND IT ALSO HAS SECURITY GUARDS.
THE OWNER IS ALSO A VERY TIGHT-LIPPED, ADMIRABLE MAN WITH VERY HIGH SOCIAL STANDING, AND HE'S BEEN ABLE TO DISCOVER MY TRUE IDENTITY.
SO, I THOUGHT THIS PLACE WOULD BE IDEAL TO "WELCOME" MY "GUESTS".

I COULD HAND-CRAFT A MASK FOR YOU, IF YOU'D LIKE.
DO NOT WANT!
DON'T YOU THINK IT'S A GOOD IDEA? I WAS REALLY WORKING HARD...
HOW ABOUT I TAKE IT AS MY REWARD?
I WON'T DISCLOSE YOUR REAL IDENTITY TO HIME-SAN.
WHAT IF I WERE TO, INSTEAD, EXPOSE THE FACT THAT SHUU IS ACTUALLY A GIRL?
This man...
YOU WOULDN'T.
IF YOU WERE PLANNING TO EXPOSE HER, YOU WOULD'VE DONE SO A VERY LONG TIME AGO.
smile

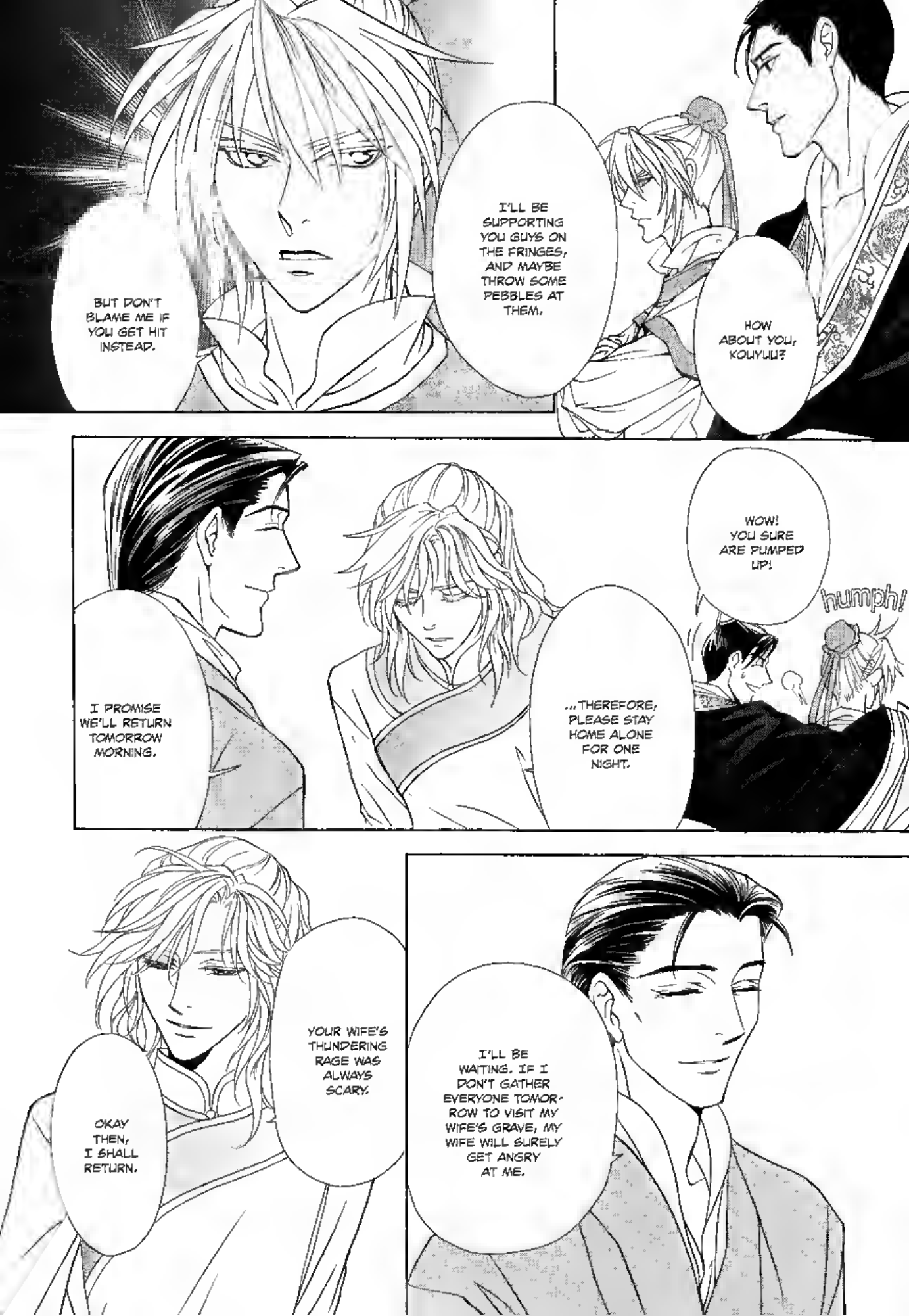
...DO AS YOU PLEASE.
BUT, I WON'T HELP YOU IN ANY WAY.
OF COURSE. NO WORRIES THERE.
WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE TODAY OUT OF ALL DAYS?!
shaking
shaking

I'LL GET GOING THEN.
IF YOU'RE ALL GOING TOO, MAKE SURE THAT YOU HAVE A SWORD WITH YOU.
SEIRAN?
IF YOU'RE FINE WITH THAT...
IT MIGHT TURN OUT TO BE SOMETHING THAT'S GONNA HAVE YOU RUNNING AROUND ALL NIGHT.
JUDGING FROM THE "WANTED" POSTER, THERE SHOULD STILL BE A GOOD NUMBER OF THEM OUT THERE.
IT'S REALLY STRANGE THAT THOSE EXTREMELY ANNOYING BANDITS WILL STAY QUIET JUST FOR TODAY.
...IS SOMETHING GOING TO HAPPEN THERE?

These two also came along...
PERHAPS THE RED STRING OF FATE TYING THOSE TWO TOGETHER REALLY WAS SEVERED 3 MONTHS AGO.
HIS HIGHNESS IS REALLY UNLUCKY, HUH?
MAYBE THEY WEREN'T EVEN TIED TOGETHER TO BEGIN WITH.
...Because they thought it'd be interesting.
I'M TERRIBLY SORRY, SIRE.
I WAS JUST ABOUT TO SEND YOU A MESSAGE SAYING THAT I'LL NOTIFY YOU AS SOON AS MY DAUGHTER RETURNS.
Damn!
SHALL WE RETURN TO THE PALACE?
I'M HEADING FOR THE MANSION MENTIONED IN THIS LETTER!
THEN I'LL JUST HAVE TO RETIE THAT STRING!
JUST WHO'S THIS ENSEI GUY?!
HE'S AN OLD FRIEND OF MINE...
A FREE-LOADER, AT THE MOMENT.

GENERAL RAN, WILL I RECEIVE SOME KIND OF SPECIAL REWARD IF I CAN SUCCESSFULLY GET RID OF ALL THE REMAINING BANDITS IN THE CITY TONIGHT?
DON'T TELL ME ... YOU KNEW THAT WAS GONNA HAPPEN, SO YOU KEPT QUIET ABOUT IT?
And you made your friend the bait...
SINCE THE MAN THAT THE BANDITS ARE AFTER AND OUR HOUSE GUEST SHARE AN EXTREMELY SIMILAR FEATURE...
...HE MUST HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN FOR THE ACTUAL MAN.
SEIRAN.
You need to mention this kind of stuff sooner...
THEN...
...DOESN'T THAT MEAN THAT SHUURE! IS ALSO IN DANGER?!
IT'S A COMPLETE COINCIDENCE.
NAH, HOW COULD I?

"FAITH?"
YOU REALLY HAVE A LOT OF FAITH IN HIM, DON'T YOU?
IT'LL BE FINE. AS LONG AS ENSEI IS BESIDE HER, HE WILL NEVER LET DANGER TOUCH HER.
I WOULD HAVE NEVER ENTRUSTED HER TO HIM IF I DIDN'T THINK SO.
OTHER THAN HIS MASTER, I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE STRONGER THAN HE IS.
EVEN IF YOU WERE TO KILL ME, I WOULD NEVER TELL THIS DIRECTLY TO HIM.
BUT, WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT OR CLUB-WIELDING, HE'S THE BEST IN THE COUNTRY.
SO, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?
OF COURSE I'M COMING! OTHERWISE I WOULDN'T EVEN KNOW WHY I CAME IN THE FIRST PLACE!
EXACTLY.


BUT DON'T BLAME ME IF YOU GET HIT INSTEAD.
I'LL BE SUPPORTING YOU GUYS ON THE FRINGES, AND MAYBE THROW SOME PEBBLES AT THEM.
HOW ABOUT YOU, KOUYUU?
I PROMISE WE'LL RETURN TOMORROW MORNING.
...THEREFORE, PLEASE STAY HOME ALONE FOR ONE NIGHT.
WOW! YOU SURE ARE PUMPED UP!
humph!
OKAY THEN, I SHALL RETURN.
YOUR WIFE'S THUNDERING RAGE WAS ALWAYS SCARY.
I'LL BE WAITING. IF I DON'T GATHER EVERYONE TOMORROW TO VISIT MY WIFE'S GRAVE, MY WIFE WILL SURELY GET ANGRY AT ME.

hehe
ENSEI ALSO HAS PRETTY ILL-FORTUNE.
I'm coming for you, Shuuren!!
THIS JUST HAS TO HAPPEN ON THE DAY WHEN BOTH HIS HIGHNESS AND GENERAL RAN ARE HERE.
AH?
...WHERE'S ENSEI?
HE SAID HE HAD SOMETHING TO TAKE CARE OF AND WENT OUT.

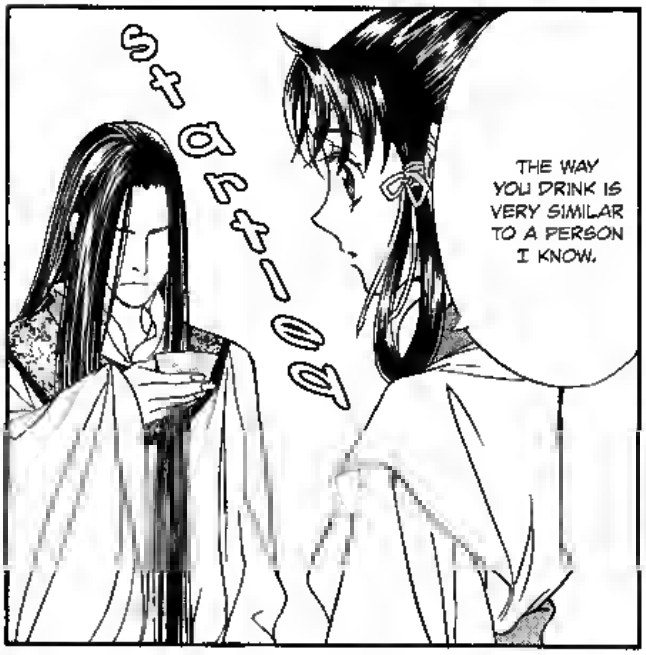
I DON'T GET ENSEI AT ALL TODAY.
What did he say?!
glance
I think I'm slowly getting used to this place...
WOULD YOU LIKE SOME TEA?
YES, PLEASE.

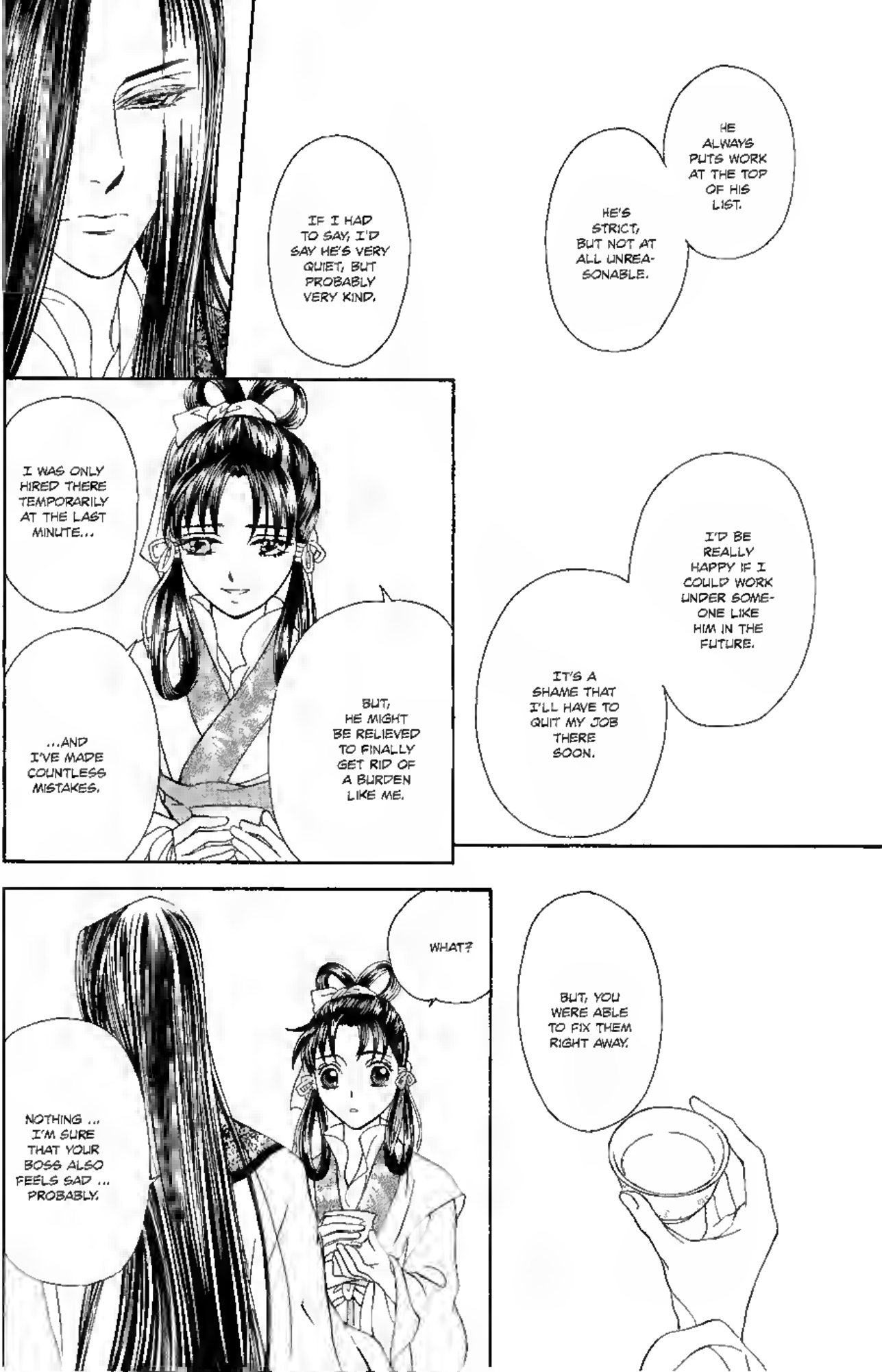
UM ... I APOLOGIZE FOR ALL THE INCONVENIENCE WE'VE CAUSED
NOT TO MENTION THE FACT THAT WE ARE TOTAL STRANGERS TO YOU.
NOT AT ALL. I ALSO HAVE MY OWN CIRCUM-STANCES.

Ah!

CIRCUM-STANCES?
OUR KEY ... AH, NEVER MIND.

EVEN THOUGH HE'S A LITTLE BIT WEIRD IN SOME WAY, HE'S A VERY DILIGENT WORKER.


Startled
THE WAY YOU DRINK IS VERY SIMILAR TO A PERSON I KNOW.


IF I HAD TO SAY, I'D SAY HE'S VERY QUIET, BUT PROBABLY VERY KIND.
HE ALWAYS PUTS WORK AT THE TOP OF HIS LIST.
HE'S STRICT, BUT NOT AT ALL UNREASONABLE.
I WAS ONLY HIRED THERE TEMPORARILY AT THE LAST MINUTE...
...AND I'VE MADE COUNTLESS MISTAKES.
BUT, HE MIGHT BE RELIEVED TO FINALLY GET RID OF A BURDEN LIKE ME.
I'D BE REALLY HAPPY IF I COULD WORK UNDER SOMEONE LIKE HIM IN THE FUTURE.
IT'S A SHAME THAT I'LL HAVE TO QUIT MY JOB THERE SOON.
WHAT?
NOTHING ... I'M SURE THAT YOUR BOSS ALSO FEELS SAD ... PROBABLY.
BUT, YOU WERE ABLE TO FIX THEM RIGHT AWAY.

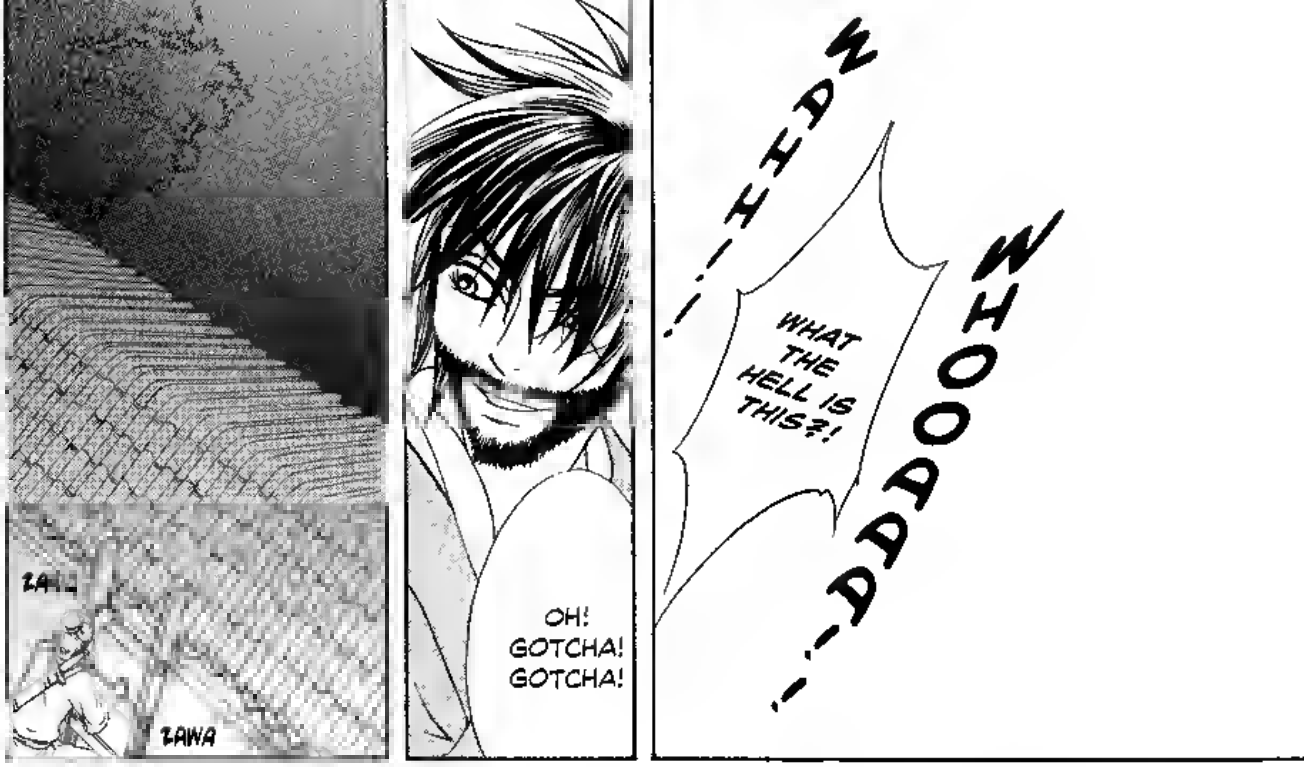
It feels as if Minister Kou himself is talking to me.
I feel really happy...
IT'D BE REALLY GREAT IF HE REALLY WERE MINISTER KOU.

rustle
rustle
OKAY! ALL THESE TRAPS SHOULD BE FINE, EVERYTHING SHOULD BE ALL SET.
Pat
pat
clatter
OH!
SO, YOU'VE FINALLY COME, SEIRAN! I EXPECTED NO LESS FROM MY CHILDHOOD FRIEND.

WHO THE HECK ARE YOU?!
YOU SAY YOU'RE MY BROTHER'S ... I MEAN SEIRAN'S CHILDHOOD FRIEND?
irritated
YOU SHOULD HAVE INCLUDED SUCH PERTINENT OF INFORMATION IN YOUR LETTER!
I'M TELLING YOU, YOU'VE SET TOO MANY TRAPS!
land
I'VE ALREADY OBTAINED PERMISSION FROM THE OWNER OF THIS HOUSE, SO YOU COULD'VE JUST USED THE FRONT DOOR.
I'M THE EMP ... I MEAN...
OH, A NEW FACE. WHO ARE YOU?
I DON'T REMEMBER EVER SEEING YOU!
GOOD ENOUGH FOR A CIVIL OFFICER.
SHIT! I WAS A STEP LATE...
BAM!

I don't need your help!
ASSISTANT MINISTER, RI-SAN.
HIME-SAN IS THERE WITH THE OWNER OF THE HOUSE.
COULD YOU GO EXPLAIN THE SITUATION?
grab
trot
trot
I'LL ALSO GO SEE SHUURE!...
FINE, I SHALL JUST HIDE AWAY!
WHY DID YOU COME HERE AGAIN?
...TO-
TO HELP, OF COURSE!

SIGH...
I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU NOT TO CAUSE ANY TROUBLE.
THAT'S WHY I BORROWED THIS MANSION INSTEAD.
YOU SAID YOU WOULDN'T GET HER INVOLVED.
YEAH, THAT WAS MY MISTAKE.
BUT, IT'S BETTER THAN SENDING HER HOME ALONE, DON'T YOU THINK?
YEAH, SHE MIGHT BE CAPTURED AND TAKEN HOSTAGE ON THE WAY.
RIGHT, RIGHT?
JUST WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?
THE BANDITS FROM SAGHUU HAVE EVEN FOLLOWED YOU ALL THE WAY TO KIYOU.
HOW TROUBLESOME.
Shuurei...
I DON'T HAVE TIME TO EXPLAIN EVERYTHING RIGHT NOW.
AFTER WE GET THROUGH TONIGHT, I'LL TALK.


ZAKL
ZAWA
OH! GOTCHA! GOTCHA!
WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!
WHOOO

MASTER.
KOUYUU RI-SAMA IS HERE.
KOUYUU RI-SAMA?
DON'T BRING HIM HERE, LEAD HIM TO A DIFFERENT ROOM.
AS YOU WISH.
IS HE AN ACQUAINTANCE OF YOURS?
...
I'LL BE AWAY FOR A WHILE. THANK YOU FOR THE TEA.
O-OKAY.
Ah...
Silky hair
...That hair.

HUH?
KNOCK
KNOCK
WHAT?
SOME-THING'S...
KNOCK
Sfx wasa [rustling]
MR. DOCTOR, I'VE GOT THE DEND-ROBIUM GRASS.
YOUSHUN SHOULD BE FINE WITH THIS.
WOW, YOU'VE GOT SO MUCH.
HOHOHO, DON'T WORRY. HE SHOULD RECOVER AFTER SLEEP-ING FOR A FEW DAYS.
I WASN'T EXPECTING THE MAT SHED TO BE CLOSED.
SHOURIN-KUN?!
I'LL LEAVE YOUSHUN IN YOUR CARE THEN.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING, SHOURIN-KUN?
IT'S A WEIRD GADGET, BUT IT'S AS SHINY AS GOLD.
OH YEAH, I'LL USE THIS AS PAY-MENT FOR THE MEDICINE.

TO THE GARDEN WHERE THAT ROU ENSEI GUY IS BEING TARGETED BY THE BANDITS.
WHAT?!
DON'T WORRY! SINCE YOU HELPED MY BUDDY, I'LL RETURN THE FAVOR.
NOW, I, THE 2ND-GENERATION HEAD OF THE FAMOUS BANDITS, "CONDORS OF SASHUU", WILL GO ASSIST HIM! YOU SHOULD JUST WAIT HERE.
WAIT, SHOU-RIN-KUN!
whoosh
SHOU-RIN-KUN!
THIS...
reveals
Isn't this the key to the palace treasure chamber?!
HOW DID THAT KID GET HIS HANDS ON IT?
WHAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAT?!

LOOKS LIKE AN ACQUAINTANCE OF MINE IS ROUGHING UP YOUR GARDEN.
I HAVE COME TO APOLOGIZE TO YOU ON HIS BEHALF.
I HAD NO IDEA YOU WERE COMING.
WHO ELSE IS HERE?
...SHOULD I ANSWER THAT QUESTION HONESTLY?
YOU'VE ALREADY ENTERED MY HOUSE WITHOUT MY PERMISSION, AND NOW YOU PLAN TO LIE TO ME?
I've ordered my servants to take shelter somewhere else as a precaution.
A MEMBER FROM SHOUKA KOU'S FAMILY, SEIRAN.
AND HIS HIGHNESS...
GENERAL OF THE URIN ARMY, SHUUEI RAN.
I SINCERELY APOLOGIZE.

WHO'S THE LAST ONE YOU MENTIONED?
HIS HIGH-NESS IS ALSO HERE.
gulp
...
LIKE THAT?
The Emperor himself is running around in that kind of commotion?
WHAT A STUPID EMPEROR.
Nevermind, he's stupid.
...THERE'S A SAYING: THE DIFFERENCE BE-TWEEN A FOOL AND A GENIUS IS PAPER-THIN.
ARE YOU DEFEND-ING HIM?
AS STUPID AS HE MAY BE, HE'S QUITE QUALIFIED TO BE THE EM-PEROR.
irritated

PLEASE WAIT THREE MORE YEARS, AND THEN YOU MAY JUDGE HIM. I HAVE FAITH IN HIM.
HE MAY NOT BE AS WISE, OR AS WIDELY ACCEPTED LIKE THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR, BUT HE'S IN NO WAY INFERIOR...
IN FACT, I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT HE WOULD ONE DAY SURPASS THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR.
QUITE A POOR THEORY COMING FROM THE MOST HIGHLY REGARDED INTELLECT IN THE COURT.
YOU CAN'T EVEN CALL THAT "THEORY".
...
BUT, IT'S MUCH BETTER THAN MERE FLATTERING LIP-SERVICE.
I HEARD THAT THE EMPEROR PRESENTED YOU WITH A JAPANESE IRIS.
MAY I SAY A FEW WORDS REGARDING THAT?
YES.
EVEN THOUGH THERE IS THE DISTINCT POSSIBILITY THAT IT WAS UNINTENTIONAL...

I CAN'T TELL YET IF HE WILL BECOME A USELESS EMPEROR OR A WISE RULER.
HE AT LEAST HAS THE POTEN-TIAL.
FINE, NO ONE ELSE, BUT YOU, THINKS THIS WAY.
I SHALL WAIT AND SEE HOW HE TURNS OUT.
SHOUKA-DONO'S DAUGH-TER IS IN THE ROOM ACROSS FROM THIS ONE. YOU MAY GO SEE HER.
MINISTER KOU, THAT GIRL...
GO.
YOU'RE NOT ONE TO HAVE A DISCUSSION WITH ME ON THAT MATTER.
...
Are you saying I'M not qualified?

THOSE TWO WERE VERY HELPFUL.
ASSIS-TANT MIN-ISTER RI.
YES?
THAT'S GREAT TO HEAR.
What you've said is re-assuring enough.

2ND ANNIVERSARY

WE ARE TWO!

NE HAVE WEATHERED MUCN BRETNREN LEADERE TNAT REFUEE TO EEE REAEON, DIEAPPEARING STAFF AND EOME CRAZY AEE MOMOE. THROUGN IT ALL, WE HAVE ETUCK TOGETNER AND OVERCOME AND KEFT OURELVES AFLOAT BECAUEE WE NEITNOR RETREAT NOR EURRENDER. I HOFE FOR MANY, MANY MORE YEARS OF MARATNON OCS, UNREAEONABLE DEAD-LINEE AND GENERAL ENENANIGANE. EFE-CIAL THANKE TO ALL OUR ETAFF FOR MAKING THIE POEEIBLE. LET UE CON-GRATULATE OURELVEE NITH COTTON CANDY AE WE VE CHIEVED NO EAEY FEAT. CNERRY UERAINBONSTAR, I NIEN YOU A PPY BIRTNDAY! DBAEANE 4 EVA YO!

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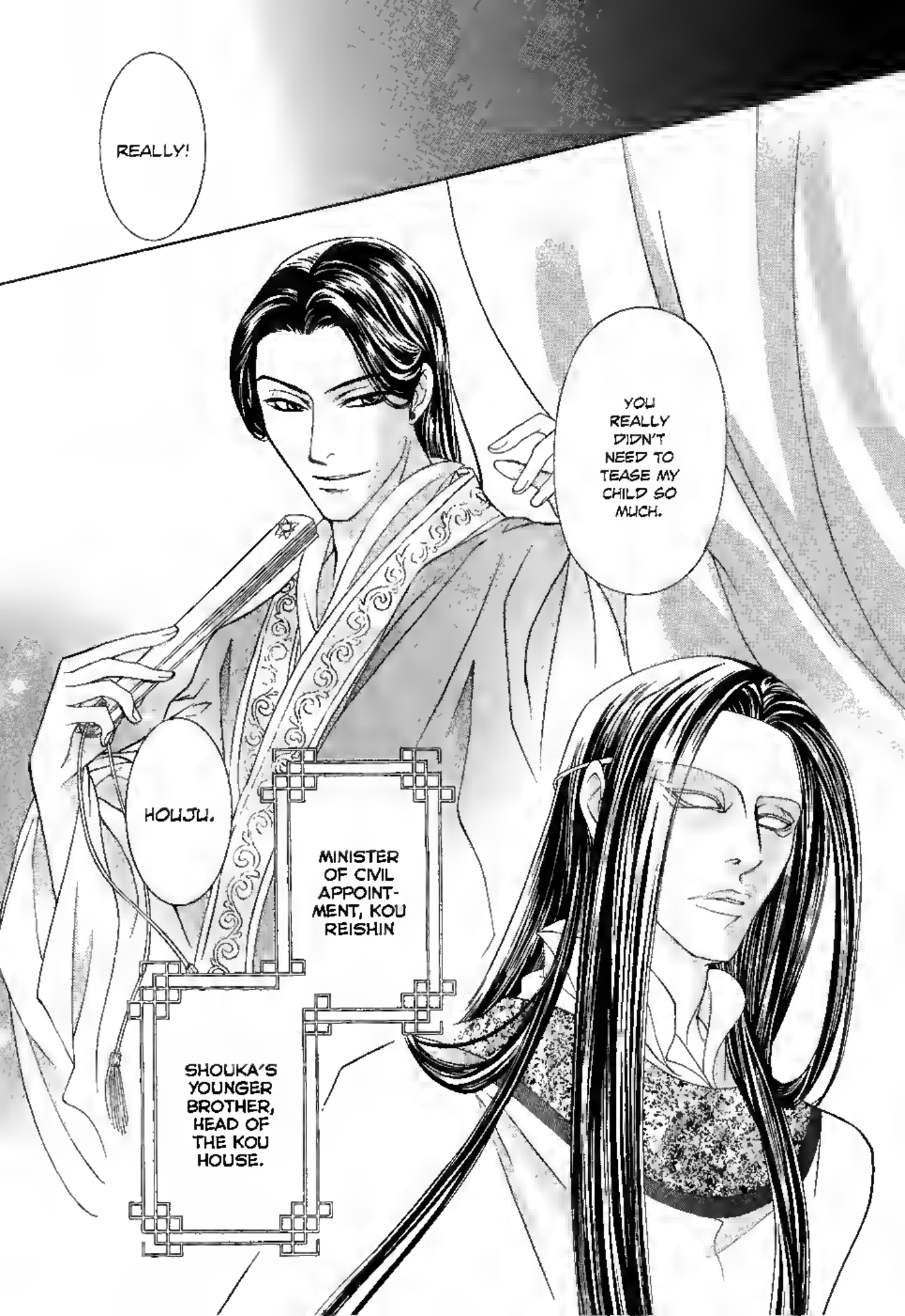

REALLY!
YOU REALLY DIDN'T NEED TO TEASE MY CHILD SO MUCH.
HOUJU.
MINISTER OF CIVIL APPOINT-MENT, KOU REISHIN
SHOUKA'S YOUNGER BROTHER, HEAD OF THE KOU HOUSE.

Flashback
I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM KOUYUU SAYING HE'D LEAVE FOR YOUR HOUSE SOON.
YOU BASTARD! YOU CONNED MY SERVANTS TO GET IN HERE AGAIN, DIDN'T YOU?
And you were also eavesdropping.
YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL, AS ALWAYS.

What they called the "nightmare national exam".
EVEN NOW, THERE'S A TACIT RULE ABOUT THE MENTION OF THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE THAT YEAR AND YOUR LEGENDARY BEAUTY.
I REMEMBER THE TIME WE TOOK THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION.
WHEN EVERYONE BUT ME COLLAPSED ONTO THE FLOOR AFTER BEHOLDING YOUR ALLURING FACE.
YOU STILL HOLD A GRUDGE?
ESPECIALLY COMING FROM YOU...
SHUT UP ABOUT MY FACE!
...
...I JUST HAD TO PUT ON A MASK OR SOMETHING!
AND LATER, SHE EVENTUALLY BECAME YOUR WIFE...
I'm afraid I just can't be your wife and stand next to a face like yours.
OF COURSE!
I WAS REJECTED BECAUSE OF MY FACE! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW I FEEL?!

thud
HOW ABOUT YOU STOP WASTING YOUR LIFE AT SHISHUU AND MOVE TO KOUSHUU?
I LOVE MY WORK.
I THINK I'M GOOD.
YOU ALWAYS PRANCE AROUND AHEAD OF ME.
WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT THAT?
YOU'VE GOT A BIG-BROTHER COMPLEX.
YOU JUST WANT TO BE NEAR SHOUKA-DONO, DON'T YOU?
IT'S NOTHING MORE THAN MERE COINCIDENCE.
IT'S ALMOST AS IF YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE HER CALL YOU "UNCLE." WHAT AN IDIOT.
I FEEL SORRY FOR HER SINCE YOU'VE BEEN WORKING HER HARD.
...
SNICKER
OH, AND IT SEEMS YOU'VE BEEN AROUND YOUR NIECE A LOT RECENTLY.
SHE OFTEN CASUALLY LAUGHS WITH THE ATTENDANTS AS SHE HELPS THEM AND EVERYONE THINKS SHE'S A STRANGE LITTLE BIT.
YOU'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND!
EVEN THOUGH I WANT TO SAY "I'M YOUR UNCLE!", I CAN'T..

Whaaa
THIS IS HOW I FEEL! I CAN ONLY SECRETLY WATCH OVER HER UNDER COVER.
HOW WOULD I UNDERSTAND? YOU WEREN'T UNDER COVER AT ALL!
You even planned an ambush.
OH, YEAH ...
OTHER THAN THE FACT THAT SHE'S YOUR NIECE, SHE'S PERFECT IN EVERY WAY.
MAYBE I SHOULD ASK HER TO BE MY WIFE...
...SINCE YOU'VE ALREADY BESTED ME ONCE...
WHAT?!
AND SHE EVEN SAID, "I FEEL LONELY BECAUSE I COULDN'T EVEN MEET HIM IN PERSON".
LIAR! AND THERE'S NO WAY IN HELL I'D EVER WANT TO GIVE HER TO YOU!
SO YOU'RE SAYING THAT I'M NOT RESPECT-ABLE?
WHAT'S RESPECTABLE ABOUT HIDING BEHIND A MASK FOR 10 YEARS AFTER GETTING DUMPED BY A GIRL?!
SHE DE-SERVES A RESPECT-ABLE MAN.

WEREN'T YOU THE ONE WHO SENT HER TO ME IN THE FIRST PLACE?
NO.
...
HMPH
KOUYUU LI, PERSONALLY RAISED BY REISHIN KOU. HE IS A VERY TALENTED INDIVIDUAL.
HE WOULD NEVER DO ANYTHING THAT WASN'T WORTHWHILE.
YOU CAN ASK KOUYUU FOR MORE DETAILS.
I PERSONALLY KNOW NOTHING.
DON'T YOU THINK IT'LL BE QUICKER FOR YOU TO SEE FOR YOURSELF?

IS IT BECAUSE HIS HIGHNESS SPECIFIED "THE NEXT EXAMINATION PERIOD"?
OF COURSE. WE DON'T HAVE THAT MUCH TIME.
THE PROPOSAL TO ALLOW WOMEN TO TAKE THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION IS STUPID AND UNACCEPTABLE.
THAT'S RIGHT. YOU WERE THINKING "IF ONLY THERE WAS ENOUGH TIME..."
THAT'S WHY WHEN KOUYUU SENT SHUURE! TO YOU, YOU ACCEPTED HER WITHOUT ANY PROTEST.
NAH, I MERELY HAD A SHORTAGE OF HELPING HANDS.
YOU KNEW SHE WAS A GIRL RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING, DIDN'T YOU?
I'LL ADMIT, THOUGH, ALLOWING WOMEN TO TAKE THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION IS SOMETHING WORTH DISCUSSING.
HOWEVER, IT WILL COMPLETELY UNDERMINE THE ACCEPTED STATUS QUO WHICH DICTATES ONLY MEN BE INVOLVE IN POLITICS.
SINCE MALE-DOMINANCE WILL LIKELY CONTINUE INDEFINITELY, WE'LL FIRST HAVE TO TRY TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S VIEWS,
BUT THIS WILL AND SHOULD TAKE A VERY LONG TIME.

IT COULD TAKE UP TO TEN YEARS TO PREPARE FOR SUCH AN UNDERTAKING, AND YET HE PROPOSES WE BEGIN CARRYING IT OUT THIS YEAR.
I ALMOST WANT TO CALL HIM CRAZY.
BUT YOU'RE STARTING TO THINK DIFFERENTLY NOW, AREN'T YOU?
dropped
THERE'S ONE THING I WANT TO ASK.
WHY DIDN'T YOU OPPOSE HIS HIGHNESS' RIDICULOUS PROPOSAL?
Why has this man, who's said to be a clever, cool-headed, and implacable secretary of ice...
...Endorsed the emperor's proposal?
Huh?
AND I KNOW THAT MY FOSTER CHILD HAS BEEN TEACHING HER AS WELL.
MY MOST WONDERFUL BROTHER IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE COUNTRY HAS BEEN TRAINING HER FOR THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION FOR YEARS.
SHE'D ALWAYS WANTED TO BECOME A GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL SINCE WHEN SHE WAS LITTLE.

DOES SHE HAPPEN TO KNOW OF THAT STUPID EMPEROR'S PROPOSAL?
ABSOLUTELY NOT.
DID SHE NOT PASS?
SHE WAS OUTSTANDING, NEVERTHELESS.
SOB
HOW PRAISEWORTHY!
SHE SIMPLY HAS A THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE, MUCH LIKE MY BROTHER, AND ISN'T AWARE OF THE EMPEROR OR KOUYUU'S INTENTIONS.
SHE JUST WANTS TO BECOME A GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL EVEN THOUGH SHE KNOWS VERY WELL THE IMPOSSIBILITIES SHE'LL FACE. SHE'S STILL TRYING HER HARDEST, HOWEVER.
My dream is to become a governmental official.
IF HER DRIVE AND HER RESULTS CAN OVERCOME CONVENTIONAL WISDOM...
...It's not entirely impossible.

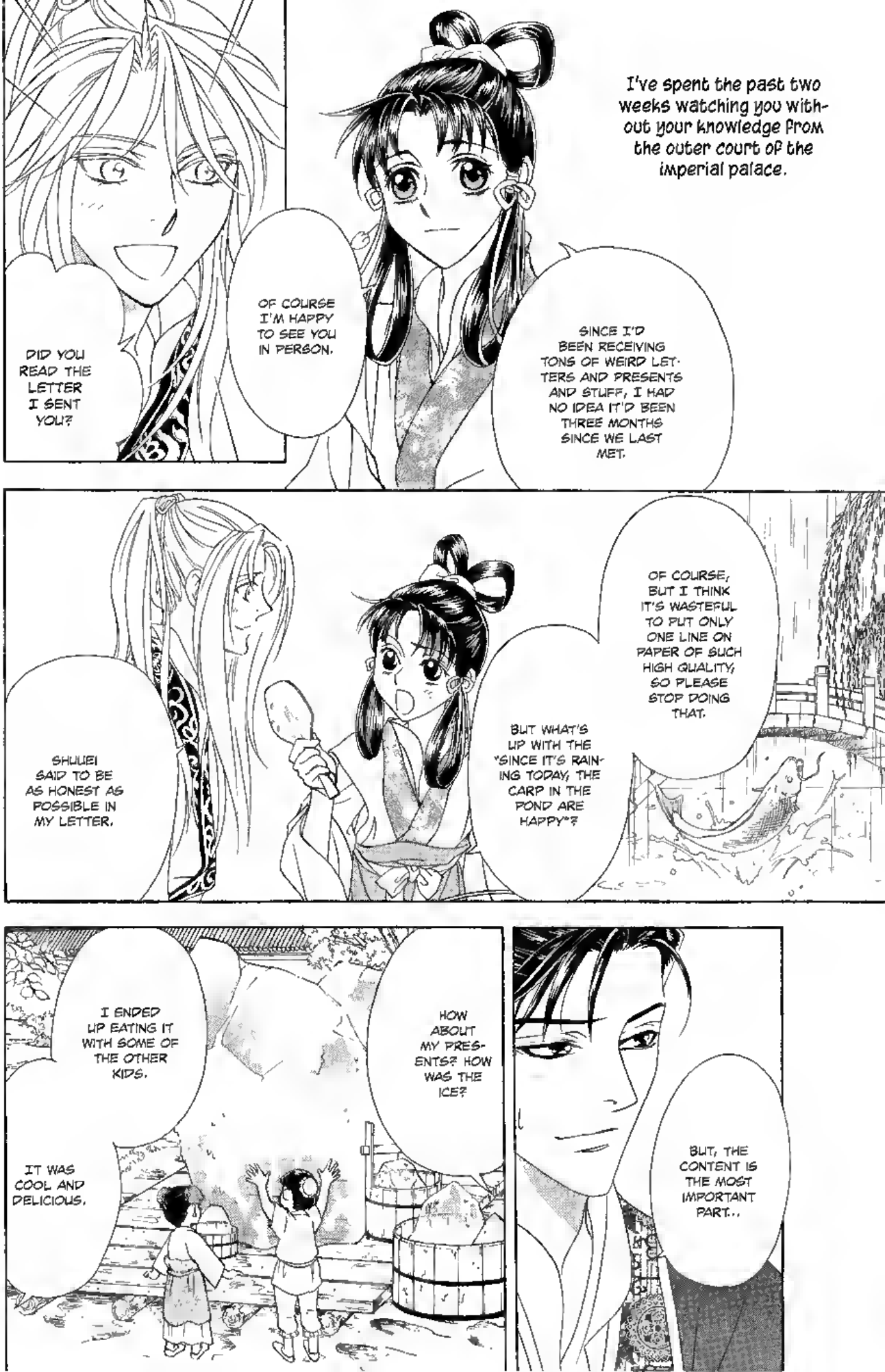
...WELL, IT'LL DEPEND ON WHAT THE EMPEROR WILL DEFINE "THE NEXT TIME" AS.
HMPH!
SPEAKING OF WHICH, WAS THAT BEARDED MAN WHO CAME ALONG WITH HER ALSO A "GIFT" FROM YOU?
BEARDED MAN? NO, I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT.
Who is he?
I SEE. WHAT A COINCI-DENCE!
LOOKS LIKE EVEN HEAVEN IS ON HER SIDE.

FIRMLY GRAB
YOU SHOULD KNOW HOW WEAK YOU ARE, SO STOP GETTING IN MY WAY!
SHOURIN, YOU LITTLE—!
whOa!
WHAT DID YOU SAY?! YOU WERE ONLY ABLE TO KICK THEIR ASSES 'CAUSE I WAS HELPING!
...
YOU DID MORE HARM THAN GOOD TO OUR SIDE!
YOU IDIOT!

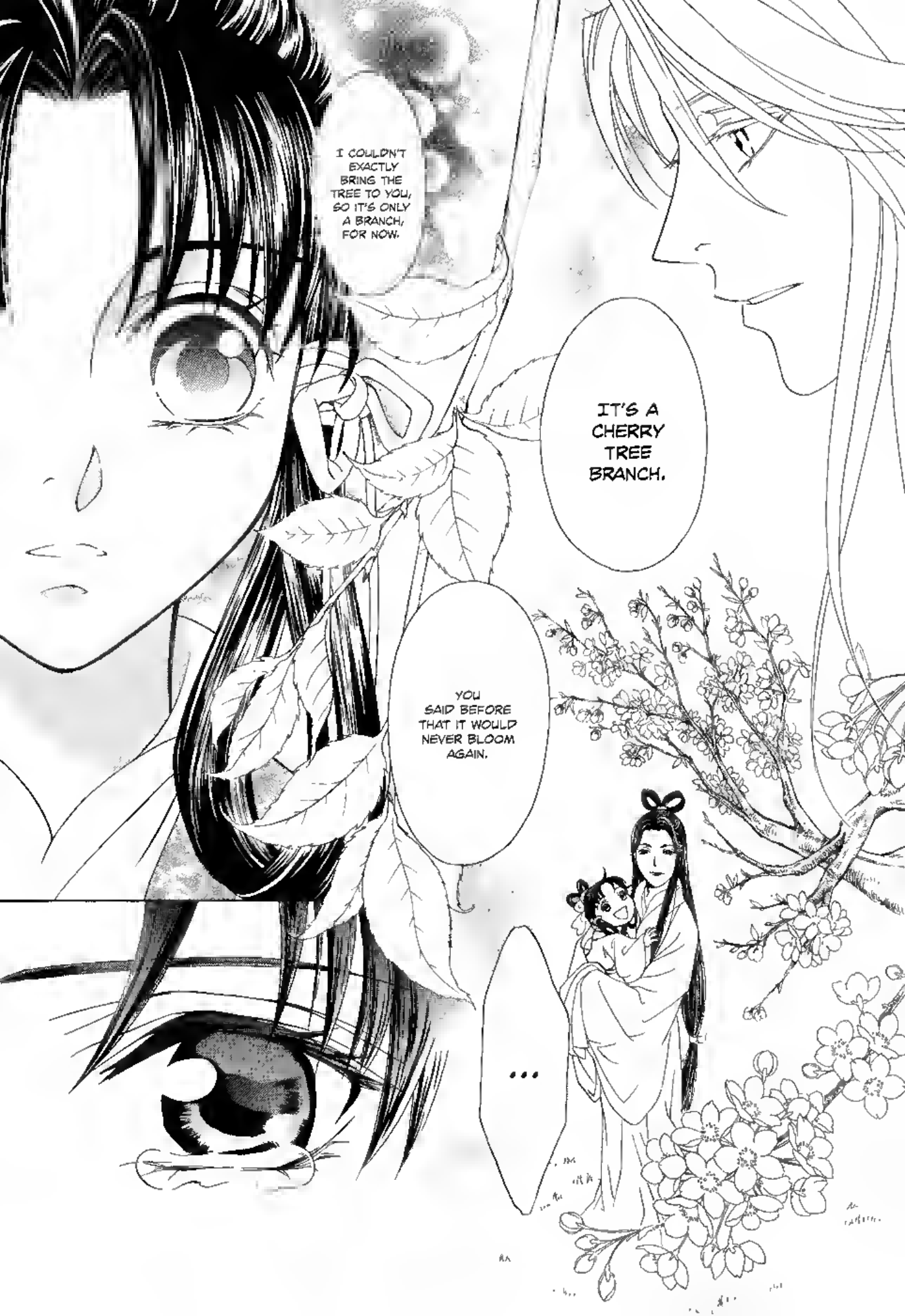
OF COURSE! HE'S THE BEST IN THIS COUN-TRY!
I SEE...
WHAT A GOOD FATHER.
IT'S 'CAUSE FATHER DID NOT TEACH US HOW TO FIGHT WITH OTHER PEOPLE.
YOU PRETTY MUCH FAILED TO CAPTURE A SINGLE ENEMY.
collapsing
kyururuu.
gu
I CAN'T MOVE ANOTHER INCH!
Same here.
...AND NOW, I'M STARVING...
THAT'S RIGHT ... I DIDN'T HAVE ANY DINNER.

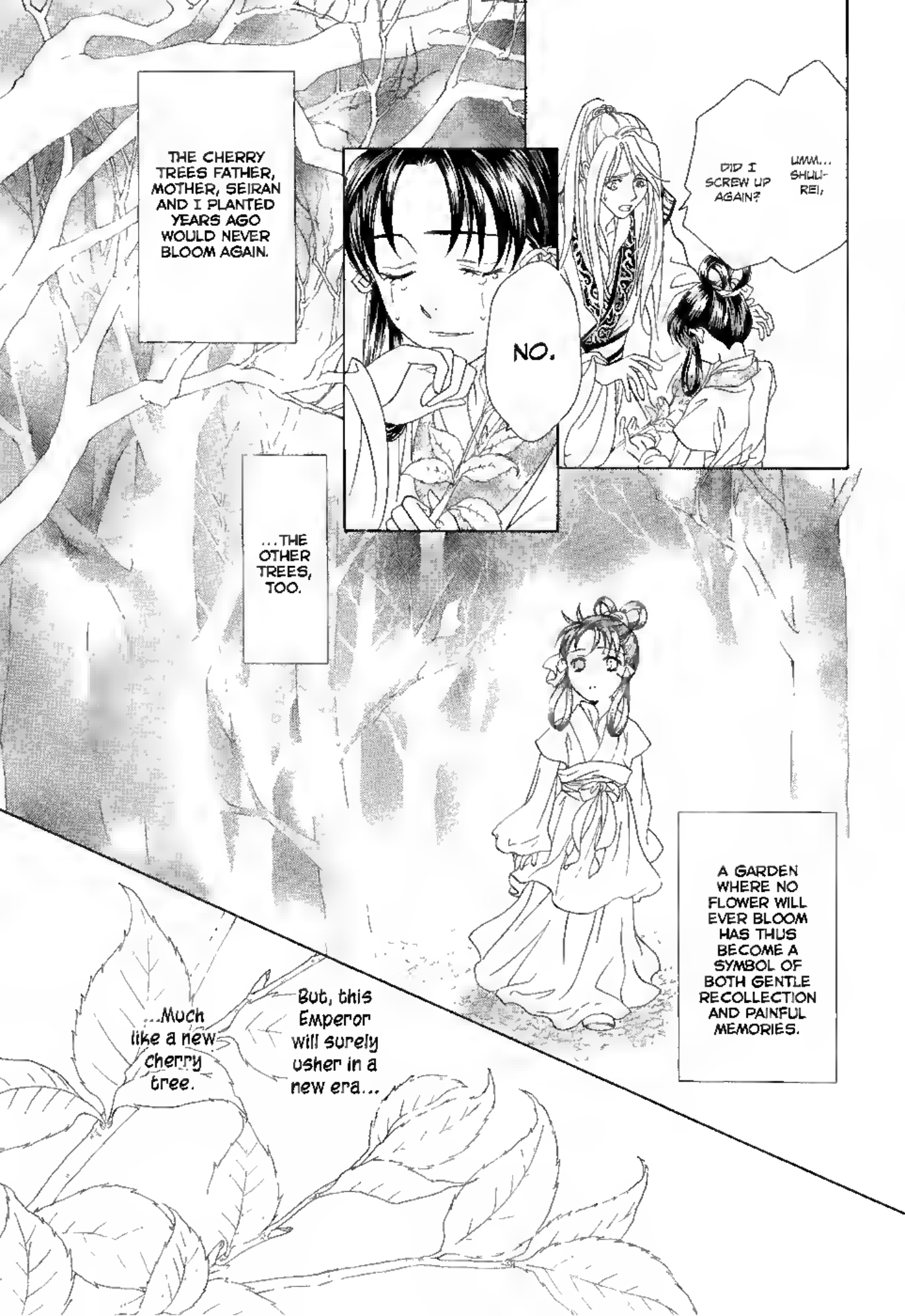
LET'S GO ASK OUR LADY TO MAKE US SOMETHING.
NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT NOW...
THIS IS SOME-ONE ELSE'S HOUSE AND GARDEN!
REALLY, NOW! WHAT WERE YOU THINK-ING?!
chew
chew
chew
chew
chew
How embar-rassing!
AND THEN YOU'VE BROUGHT ALONG ALL THESE PEOPLE!
THEY'VE EVEN LET ME BORROW THEIR KITCHEN TO MAKE ALL THIS FOOD FOR YOU!
WE'RE LUCKY THE OWNER IS SO NICE!

I SENT OUT A FORMAL NOTICE AND RECEIVED A REPLY FROM SHOUKA.
OH MY GOD, EVEN YOU ARE HERE?
SHUUREI, SECONDS PLEASE!
HERE.
I WAITED THREE MONTHS...
YOU CAN SCRAM NOW, AND STOP COMING FOR ME.
Geez!
That's because Father will never say anything at all.
SHUUREI, AREN'T YOU HAPPY TO FINALLY SEE ME?


I've spent the past two weeks watching you without your knowledge from the outer court of the imperial palace.
DID YOU READ THE LETTER I SENT YOU?
OF COURSE I'M HAPPY TO SEE YOU IN PERSON.
SINCE I'D BEEN RECEIVING TONS OF WEIRD LETTERS AND PRESENTS AND STUFF, I HAD NO IDEA IT'D BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE WE LAST MET.
SHUUEI SAID TO BE AS HONEST AS POSSIBLE IN MY LETTER.
BUT WHAT'S UP WITH THE "SINCE IT'S RAINING TODAY, THE CARP IN THE POND ARE HAPPY"?
OF COURSE, BUT I THINK IT'S WASTEFUL TO PUT ONLY ONE LINE ON PAPER OF SUCH HIGH QUALITY, SO PLEASE STOP DOING THAT.
I ENDED UP EATING IT WITH SOME OF THE OTHER KIDS.
IT WAS COOL AND DELICIOUS.
HOW ABOUT MY PRESENTS? HOW WAS THE ICE?
BUT, THE CONTENT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART..

WHAT ABOUT THE RED FLOWERS? WEREN'T THEY PRETTY?
YES. I PRESSED THEM TO MAKE FLOWER BOOK-MARKS.
I SHARED THEM WITH THE NEIGHBORS. YOU REALLY HELPED CUT DOWN OUR FOOD EXPENSE.
DID LIKE YOU THE BOILED EGGS?
Straw doll?
YO, SEIRAN!
AND THE STRAW DOLL?
DOESN'T THE DOLL GET ON YOUR NERVES?
NO, I LIKE IT FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART.
IT'S NOW A DECORA-TION IN MY ROOM.
quietly
ACTUALLY, I BROUGHT ANOTHER PRESENT WITH ME TODAY.
What is it this time?
Eh?
rummage


I COULDN'T EXACTLY BRING THE TREE TO YOU, SO IT'S ONLY A BRANCH, FOR NOW.
IT'S A CHERRY TREE BRANCH.
YOU SAID BEFORE THAT IT WOULD NEVER BLOOM AGAIN.
...


THE CHERRY TREES FATHER, MOTHER, SEIRAN AND I PLANTED YEARS AGO WOULD NEVER BLOOM AGAIN.
NO.
...THE OTHER TREES, TOO.
UMM... SHUU-REI,
DID I SCREW UP AGAIN?
A GARDEN WHERE NO FLOWER WILL EVER BLOOM HAS THUS BECOME A SYMBOL OF BOTH GENTLE RECOLLECTION AND PAINFUL MEMORIES.
...Much like a new cherry tree.
But, this Emperor will surely usher in a new era...

Flowers will bloom again in my garden...
...And the sad memories will be left behind.
I'll plant this and start creating a new garden...
THANK YOU!
I'VE NEVER BEEN HAPPIER.

Gently
Grin
Grin
...I think something outrageous just happened!
I-I...

RYUUKI, DO YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU'VE JUST DONE WRONG...?
"DONE WRONG"? WHAT?
I ONLY KISSED YOU BECAUSE YOU LOOKED CUTE.
I FIGURE YOU WON'T UNDERSTAND EVEN IF I EXPLAINED IT TO YOU, SO I'LL MAKE IT BRIEF.
SINCE YOU DID WHAT YOU JUST DID, WHY DON'T YOU BE A GOOD BOY AND...
WHAT?!
Grasp
SHUUREI, YOU'RE BEING IRRATIONAL!
WHOA
YOU MUST GIVE ME A CLEAR EXPLANATION!
LET ME BEAT THE CRAP OUTTA YOU?!

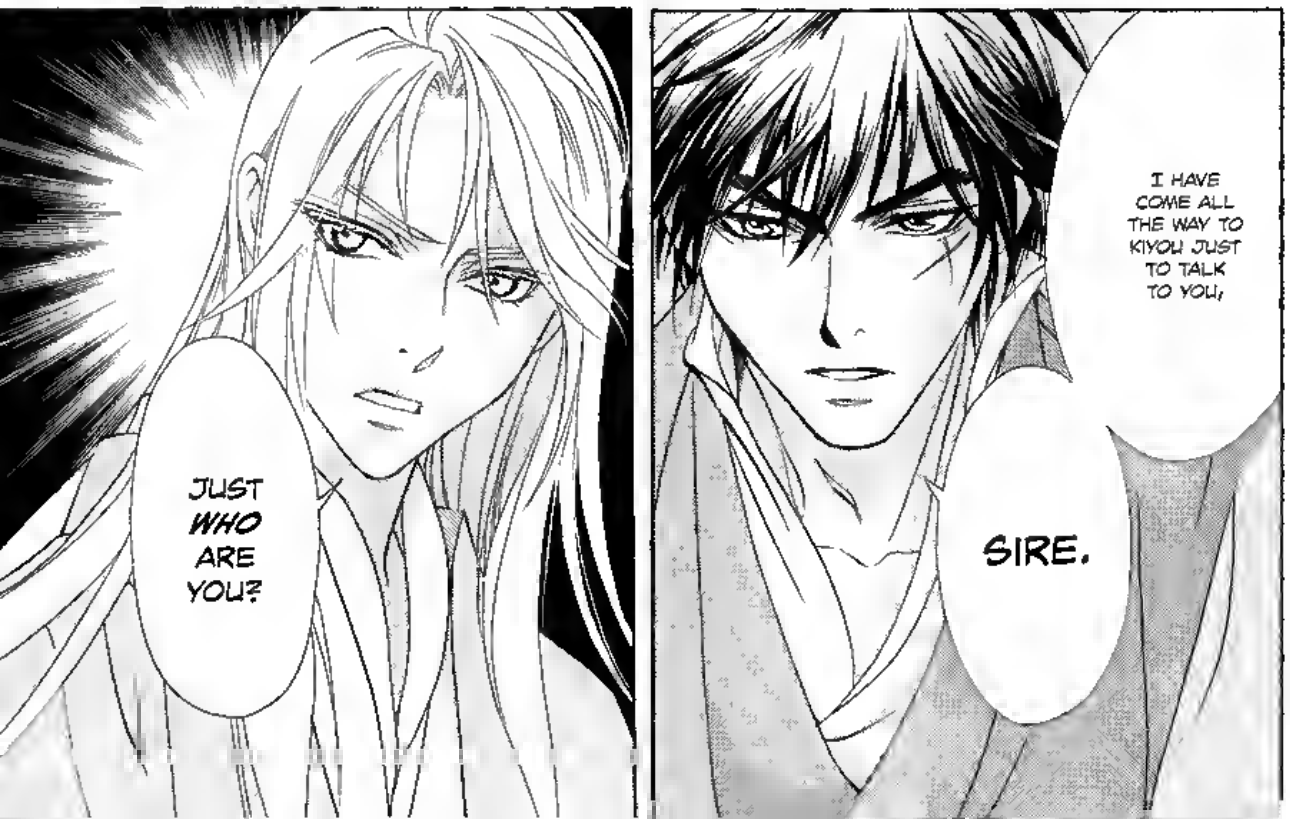
I DON'T WANT TO BE CALLED "IRRATIONAL", ESPECIALLY BY YOU!
YOU BLOCK HEAD!
SO, FIRST, HE MADE HER LOWER HER GUARD, AND THEN HE SUDDENLY SHOT THE TARGET WITH A PRESENT.
WHAT A EXCEPTIONAL LOVE STRATEGY!
BUT, IS HE GOING TO STOP THERE? PERHAPS IF HE HAD WAITED UNTIL THEY WERE ALONE TO GIVE HER THAT KISS, IT WOULD HAVE ENDED DIFFERENTLY.
snicker
HIS HIGHNESS IS VERY SINCERE, BUT HE NEEDS FINESSE.
It's because you only think about that kind of stuff that you are known as a man of "everlasting youth".
NAH, HE DID IT SUBCONSCIOUSLY, AND THE GIRL ALSO DOCILELY ACCEPTED IT.
BUT I TRULY APPRECIATE WHAT HE DID WITH THE CHERRY BRANCH.
YOU MEAN YOU AREN'T ANGRY? HE JUST MADE A MOVE ON OUR PRECIOUS HIME-SAN!
That hurts!
NOT REALLY.
It's no big deal.

NOW SHE WILL NEVER CRY AGAIN WHEN SHE LOOKS INTO THE GARDEN.
SO IN THE END, SHE'S MAKING ME SLEEP ALL ALONE...

You can sleep alone now, can't you?
Night! And get some rest, okay?
tingling
AND TO THINK THAT WE ARE SLEEPING SEPARATELY UNDER THE SAME ROOF...
tingling
HOW HEART-BREAK-ING.
knock
knock
THIS IS ENSEI. MAY I COME IN?
Ensei?
He claims to be my brother's friend...
...But he seems very close to Shuurei...
That bear!!
WHAT DO YOU WANT? IT'S ALREADY...

...WHO ARE YOU?
...LATE?
OH, COME ON! ALL I DID WAS TRIM A LITTLE BIT...

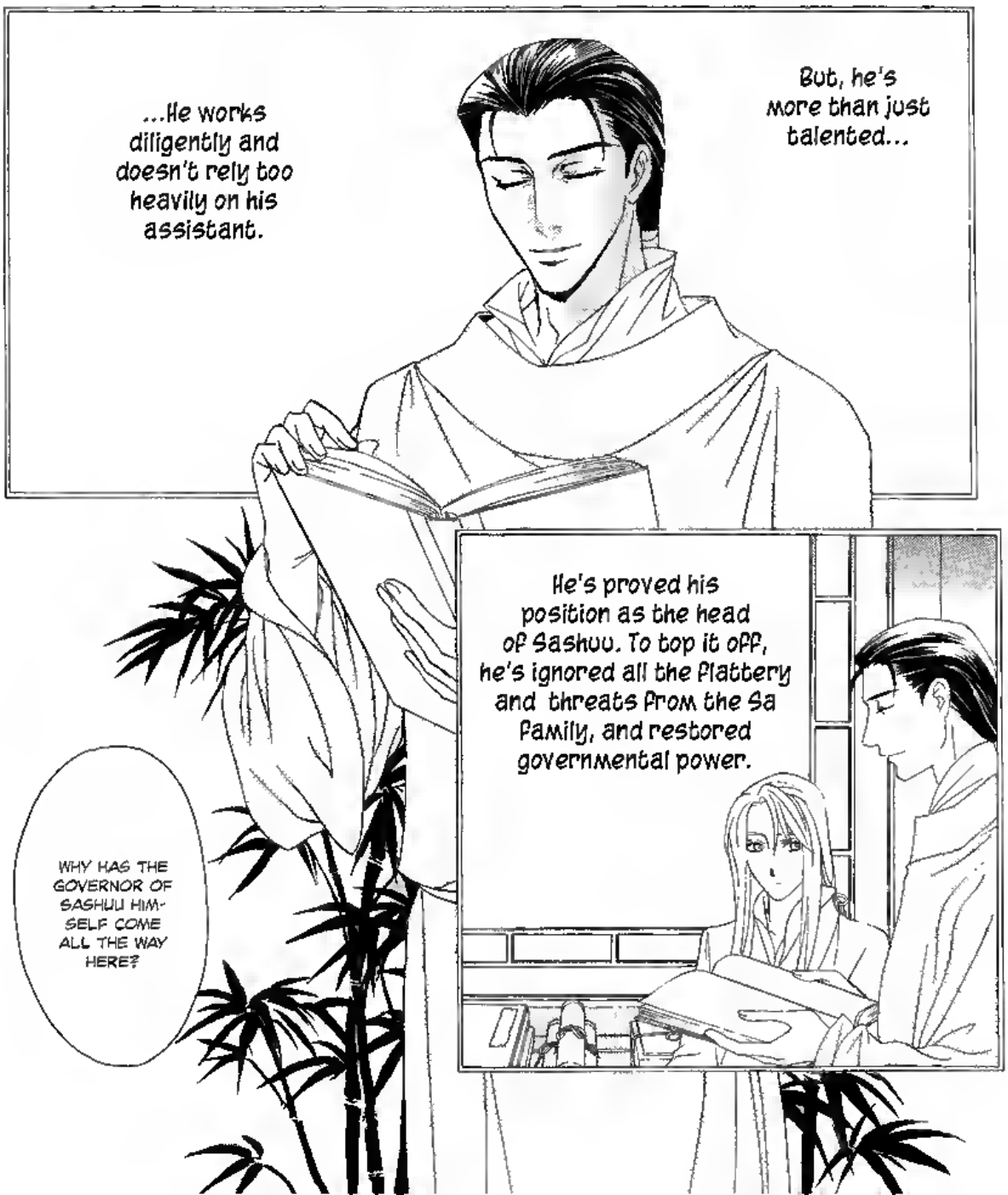
ENSEI ?!
I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD BE THIS SHOCKING.
SO THAT'S WHAT YOU REALLY LOOK LIKE!
Compared to that masked man...
YOU'RE LIKE ... A DIFFERENT PERSON.
smile
WILL YOU LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO SAY?
YOU PROMISED EARLIER YOU WOULD LATER TONIGHT.
YES.
I DID?


I HAVE COME ALL THE WAY TO KIYOU JUST TO TALK TO YOU.
SIRE.
JUST WHO ARE YOU?

CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES PREVENTED ME FROM ATTENDING THE CORONATION, SO I SENT MY ASSISTANT TO PAY RESPECTS TO YOU. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'M MEETING WITH YOU IN PERSON.
I AM THE GOVERNOR OF SASHUU, ROU ENSEI.
The governor of Sashuu?!
...With a cross-shaped scar on the left cheek...
So he's the one who the Sashuu bandits are after...

YOU WERE QUITE THE EXCEPTION. YOU WERE APPOINTED GOVERNOR WITHOUT EVEN TAKING THE CIVIL EXAMINATION.
SO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME?
GRAND GARDIAN SA SAID, "IT IS BEST TO FIND A GOVERNOR WHO CAN FEND OFF ASSASSINS
IF HE IS TO BECOME PART OF THE SA FAMILY'S STRATEGIC PLAN".

I HAD FULL CONFIDENCE IN MY PHYSICAL ABILITIES, SO IT WAS A LITTLE ABSURD THAT I COULDN'T EVEN PASS THE PRELIMINARY EXAM.
BUT IN THE END, OLD MAN ENJUN ENTICED ME INTO SOMETHING NICE...
Somehow, I completely understand.
WAS HE REFERRING TO YOU?
YEAH, I GUESS...
SHOUKA HAS TOLD ME...
...THAT THE NEW GOVERNOR PROTECTS THE SA FAMILY FROM THREATS.
ehehe
IT WAS KINDA LAST-MINUTE, SO I WAS SUPPOSEDLY HIRED ON A TRIAL BASIS UNDER THE SUPERVISION A TALENTED ASSISTANT, BUT ANYWAY, I ENDED UP BEING APPOINTED.


At the same time, his genius assistant does an excellent job governing Sashuu.
Of course, this includes the covert assassins.
He's even fended off ten bandits all by himself.
...He works diligently and doesn't rely too heavily on his assistant.
But, he's more than just talented...
He's proved his position as the head of Sashuu. To top it off, he's ignored all the flattery and threats from the Sa family, and restored governmental power.
WHY HAS THE GOVERNOR OF SASHUU HIMSELF COME ALL THE WAY HERE?

I HAVE COME TO ASK YOUR HIGHNESS TO KEEP THIS.
MADE FROM LOCALLY PRODUCED SASHUU AMBER, WITH THE SASHUU STATE FLOWER GESSAIKA* DECORATING THE RING.
ISN'T THIS THE OFFICIAL JADE ORNAMENT AND SEAL STAMP BELONGING TO THE SASHUU GOVERNOR?
*Note: gessaika = moon-dye flower = a fictional flower

A SYMBOL OF ONE'S HIGH GOVERNMENTAL POSITION.
I PROBABLY DON'T DESERVE TO BE CARRYING THIS ANY LONGER.

A WHILE AGO, GRAND GUARDIAN SA PASSED AWAY.
ANOTHER FAMILY IN SASHUU BEGAN A DISPUTE OVER POWER AND LEGITIMACY.
THE SASHUU GOVERNMENT ALSO GOT INVOLVED.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
THIS IS THE TIME YOU'RE MOST NEEDED IN SASHUU TO QUELL THE DISPUTE STARTED BY THAT FAMILY.
THEN WHY DID YOU COME HERE YOURSELF?
YOUR HIGHNESS...
AND THAT'S WHY I CAME TO SEE YOU.

GRAND GUARDIAN SA IS GONE...
...I HAVEN'T PASSED THE CIVIL EXAMINATION, AND I DON'T EVEN HAVE A FORMAL APPOINTMENT LETTER.
IF I WERE TO RECEIVE LETTERS DENOUNCING MY LEGITIMACY, THERE WOULDN'T BE MUCH I COULD SAY TO DEFEND MYSELF.
I'M RETURNING THE JADE AND THE SEAL STAMP TO THE CAPITAL, SO THAT EVEN AFTER I RESIGN FROM OFFICE, PEOPLE WILL THINK THAT I HAVE GOOD MORALS.
AT LEAST THE SA FAMILY WILL STAY PUT FOR A WHILE UNTIL A NEW GOVERNOR IS APPOINTED.
IS THAT WHY THE BANDITS CHASED YOU HERE ALL THE WAY FROM SASHUU?

shiver
DO YOU REALIZE THE URIN ARMY HAS BECOME THE PICTURE OF HELL BECAUSE OF THAT?
?
BUT I WAS FIERCELY FIGHTING BACK THE BANDITS AT NIGHT.
YEAH. AT SOME POINT, A BOUNTY WAS PLACED ON MY HEAD.
EVERYONE WHO CAME HAD THEIR JADE AND SEAL STAMP DESTROYED ON THE WAY EXCEPT ME.
AH, THEM? THERE WAS SOME SORT OF MISUNDERSTANDING...
"CONDORS OF SASHUU", IS IT?
Speaking of which...
ARE THOSE KIDS ALSO AFTER YOU THEN?
YES, HE STOLE BUT NEVER ONCE TOOK A LIFE.
HE WAS IN NO WAY A COMMON CRIMINAL.
"ROBIN HOOD"?! LIKE, TAKING FROM THE RICH AND GIVING TO THE POOR?
THEIR DECEASED FATHER WAS A LEGENDARY ROBIN HOOD-LIKE FIGURE CALLED "CONDOR OF SASHUU".

HIS STRENGTH AND HIS NAME HAVE SINCE BECOME LEGEND.
ONE DAY, HE IMPULSIVELY TOOK IN A WOMAN AND HER KIDS...
FROM THAT DAY ON, HE NEVER STOLE AGAIN.
THOSE TWO LITTLE IDIOTS SENT BY THE SA FAMILY BELIEVED IN THE RUMORS AND ACCEPTED THE MISSION TO KILL ME.
ROBIN HOOD ASSAS-SINS?
YEAH ...
AT THE TIME, THEIR PARENTS HAD ALREADY PASSED AWAY.
THE POOR KIDS WEREN'T THINKING STRAIGHT.
We have to follow in our father's foot-steps and become great bandits!
Yes, bro ... I mean, Boss!
NO HARM WAS EVER DONE, AND I'M ALSO PARTIALLY RESPON-SIBLE...
I'm very good at the art of per-suasion
...SO PLEASE, JUST SPARE THOSE TWO.
WELL, THEY ARE KIDS AFTER ALL, SO THERE'S NOTH-ING WE CAN DO TO THEM.

NO...
I ALREADY MENTIONED THAT I HAVEN'T EVEN PASSED THE CIVIL EXAMINATION.
IN REGARDS TO THE ORIGINAL ISSUE, HOWEVER...
...I WILL OFFICIALLY NAME YOU THE LEGITIMATE GOVERNOR OF SASHUU TOMORROW.
NEXT TIME, I'LL BECOME A LEGITIMATE GOVERNOR, AND NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.
SO NOW IS MY CHANCE.
IT'S MEANINGLESS TO REPEAT THE PROBLEM.
I'M CONFIDENT THAT I CAN BECOME THE NEW GOVERNOR AFTER THE CIVIL EXAM. BUT BEFORE THAT, PLEASE TAKE CARE OF SASHUU.
THE SA FAMILY IS BUSY RIGHT NOW FIGHTING OVER WHO SHOULD BE THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY, SO THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO INTERFERE TOO MUCH WITH THE GOVERNMENT.
MY ASSISTANT AND I HAVE ALREADY STRENGTHENED THE FOUNDATION.

I wanted to see with my own eyes if I could trust the new Emperor.
I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT KIND OF PERSON OUR NEW EMPEROR WAS
AND SEE WHO HE SURROUNDED HIMSELF WITH.
YOU CAME ALL THIS WAY TO TELL ME THIS?
YES.
SORRY, I WAS PLANNING TO JUST HIDE IN YOUR BEDROOM.
You risked your life to tell me all this...
... For the sake of Sashuu.
WHAT CONFIDENCE.
SO WHAT DO YOU PLAN TO DO NOW?
I SHALL RETURN TO SASHUU. EVEN WITHOUT MY GOVERNOR POSITION, THERE'S STILL A LOT OF THINGS I CAN HELP WITH.
OKAY, THEN, IT'S AN ORDER.
ROU ENSEI.

THERE'S SOMEONE FAR MORE TALENTED THAN I AM FOR THE RANK OF ASSISTANT.
IF YOU DO, I'LL BE ABLE TO AT THE VERY LEAST NAME YOU THE "GOVERNOR'S ASSISTANT".
YOU SHOULD PREPARE TO PASS THE NEXT PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION, AT LEAST.
...You will return, won't you?
I PLAN TO TAKE THE PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION.
But my bunch is still hanging on there in Sashuu even now...
I'm beginning to feel uneasy already.
...As governmental officials.
If the emperor is willing to intervene on my behalf, then my job here is done.
...SINCE IT WAS ORIGINALLY MY DREAM TO BECOME THE CIVIL OFFICIAL OF SASHUU.
I've been wondering if I'll really be able to sit down and study for once.

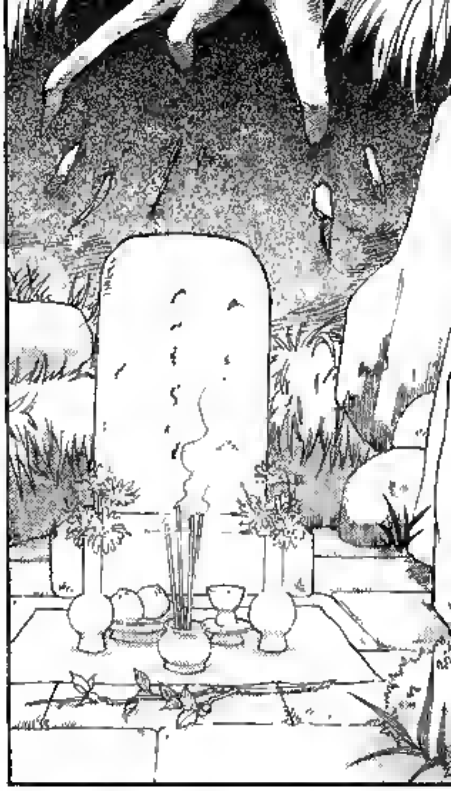
I THOUGHT I'D TRY AGAIN, FROM SCRATCH.
Hime-san...
...So I failed to see what was most important, after all.
...As governmental officials.
THOSE WHO'VE WORKED UNDER YOU IN SASHUU ARE SURELY WAITING...
THEY'RE WAITING...

ACCORDING TO HIM, TWO CROWS JUST FLEW IN, SNATCHED THE KEY FROM HIM, AND FLEW!
WHEN WE TOOK IT TO ASSISTANT MINISTER KEI THIS MORNING, HE WAS SO HAPPY HE BURST INTO TEARS.
OH YEAH, SO THAT KEY REALLY IS THE KEY TO THE TREASURY CHAMBER!
Chapon
AND SOMEHOW THE KEY FELL INTO SHOURIN'S HANDS.
AND THAT'S HOW IT RETURNED TO THE MINISTRY OF REVENUE IN THE END.
WHAT A COINCIDENCE!
Yep!
Right, father?
AT ANY RATE...
ARE YOU REALLY ENSEI?
OR ARE YOU LIKE AN IMPOSTER OR A REPLACEMENT OF HIM?
I'D LIKE TO SEE HOW THAT'D WORK!

BEFORE
AFTER
LOOK CLOSELY NOW ... MY VOICE AND MY SCAR ARE STILL THE SAME, RIGHT?
BUT 26? YESTERDAY YOU WERE DEFINITELY OVER 40!
You looked as old as Father!
YOU'RE SO MEAN!

But for him to end up looking like such a "nice man"...
... Must be some trick...

I just realized that up till now, I've always cried whenever I visit Mother's grave.



...WHICH WILL SURELY DE-VELOP MANY FLOWERS IN THIS NEW ERA...
DEAR MOTHER, RYUUKI GAVE ME A NEW SEEDLING...
Please lead a happy life...
...With Shoka and Seiran.

LISTEN CAREFULLY.
RIGHT NOW, WE'RE PUSHING FOR A BILL THAT WILL ALLOW WOMEN TO TAKE THE NATIONAL CIVIL EXAMINATION.
?!
Women taking the civil exam?!
THE EMPEROR AND I WILL PROBABLY GET IT PASSED IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS YEAR.
WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN TAKING THE EXAM?

KOUYUU-SAMA...
BUT EVEN IF YOU PASS THE EXAM, YOUR ROAD WILL STILL BE VERY DIFFICULT.
IF YOU BECOME AN OFFICIAL, YOU WILL NOT BE GIVEN EASY TASKS, AND YOUR OPINIONS WILL BE IGNORED.
AS A WOMAN, YOU'LL DEFINITELY BE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST.
YOU WILL BE PEPPERED WITH RIDICULE AND INSULTS. YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO HANG ON THERE ALL BY YOURSELF.
THAT BEING THE CASE...
clench
ARE YOU STILL WILLING TO TAKE THE EXAM?
I WILL TAKE IT.
Why can't girls take the civil exam?
Why?
Do you wish to become a governmental official?
PLEASE, LET ME TAKE IT.

I WISH ...
...TO BECOME A GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL.
I'm counting on you to give me good guidance.
MOTHER, I'LL DO MY BEST, SO JUST WAIT AND SEE.
VERY GOOD.
YOU'LL SURELY BECOME A GOOD OFFICIAL.

SEVERAL DAYS LATER,
AS THE HOT SUMMER IS ABOUT TO TAKE ITS LEAVE...
WELL THEN, THIS IS GOODBYE, HIME-SAN.

SORRY FOR HAVING INCONVENIENCED YOU FOR SO LONG.
ENSEI!
THANK YOU! HIME-SAN, YOUR COOKING WAS THE BEST!
OH YEAH, YOU CAN GO AHEAD AND TAKE MY SALARY FROM THE MINISTRY.
chuckle
IF YOU EVER COLLAPSE AGAIN, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO DO IT IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE.
AND SINCE YOU'RE ALSO SEIRAN'S FRIEND, WE'LL ALWAYS WELCOME YOU.
Right?
He's got a very indecipherable expression...
HIME-SAN, YOU'RE SUCH A GOOD GIRL!
GRAB
KYA!
YOU'RE ENERGETIC, GENTLE, A GOOD COOK, AND YOU'RE HARD-WORKING.
IT'LL BE INTERESTING IF YOU EVER BECOME MY SUPERIOR, HIME-SAN.

HUH? WHAT?
WHAT DID YOU SAY?
WELL, THEN...
HIME-SAN, SEIRAN-SAN, PLEASE TAKE CARE.
HE LOOKED QUITE UNCONCERNED.
WHAT AN INTERESTING GUY.
HE'S BEING ENTIRELY TOO CASUAL ... PERHAPS WE'LL SEE HIM AGAIN VERY SOON.

SO, AT THE END OF SUMMER, WHERE EVEN THE BEASTS HAD QUIETED DOWN, A BILL WAS PASSED...
...THE BILL TO PERMIT FEMALE TEST CANDIDATES TO TAKE THE NATIONAL CIVIL EXAM.
IT WILL SURELY BE IMPLEMENTED DURING THE NEXT CIVIL EXAM AS AN EXPERIMENT.
THE TWO PEOPLE RUMORED TO BE THE POSSIBLE CANDIDATES FOR THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER, MINISTER KOU (RED) OF CIVIL APPOINTMENT AND MINISTER KOU (YELLOW) OF REVENUE, BOTH NODDED THEIR HEADS. IN DOING THAT, THEY WERE ABLE TO SUPPRESS THE OPPOSITION, AND ALLOW THE BILL TO PASS.

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第16話

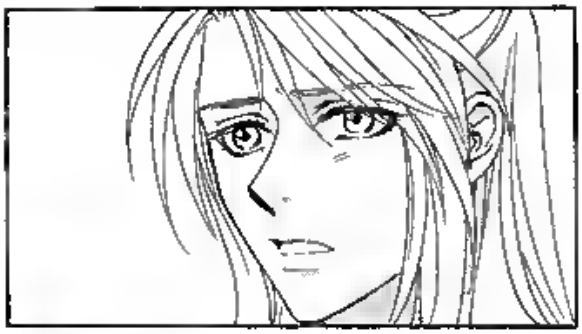
第16話

彩雨国物語

SHUWEI...
YES?

COULD I BE MAKING A MISTAKE?
SHUUREI SAID SHE WANTED TO BECOME A GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL.
BUT WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN, THEN?
BUT THAT ISN'T WHAT I DESIRE.
SHUUREI WILL SURELY ACCOMPLISH HER GOAL.
Yes, as an official.
IT'S CLOSE, BUT A LITTLE OFF TRACK.

ENSEI SAID SHUUREI WOULD MAKE AN EXCELLENT OFFICIAL...
...BUT I WASN'T ABLE TO SAY ANY-THING.
THAT'S BECAUSE WHAT YOUR HIGHNESS DESIRES ISN'T FOR SHUUREI TO BECOME AN EXCELLENT OFFICIAL, IS IT?
As soon as you voiced the thought of allowing women to take the Civil exam...
...I under-stood your intentions...
YOUR HIGHNESS IS TRYING TO GET CLOSER TO SHUUREI-DONO, AND ALLOWING HER TO BECOME AN OFFICIAL IS A WAY TO ADVANCE YOUR OBJECTIVES.
BUT TO SHUUREI-DONO, THAT IS THE GOAL.
SHE PROBABLY WISHES TO STAY AN OF-FICIAL AND WORK.



AS YOUR HIGHNESS HAS MENTIONED, IT'S AN EXISTENCE WHERE YOU'RE BOTH CLOSE BY AND FAR AWAY.

...AND THERE WILL BE NO RELATIONSHIP.

I SINCERELY APOLOGIZE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

?

I suddenly sounded cold and unfeeling because it reminded me of my own struggle with love in the past.

How will your blithe love change in this stressful situation?

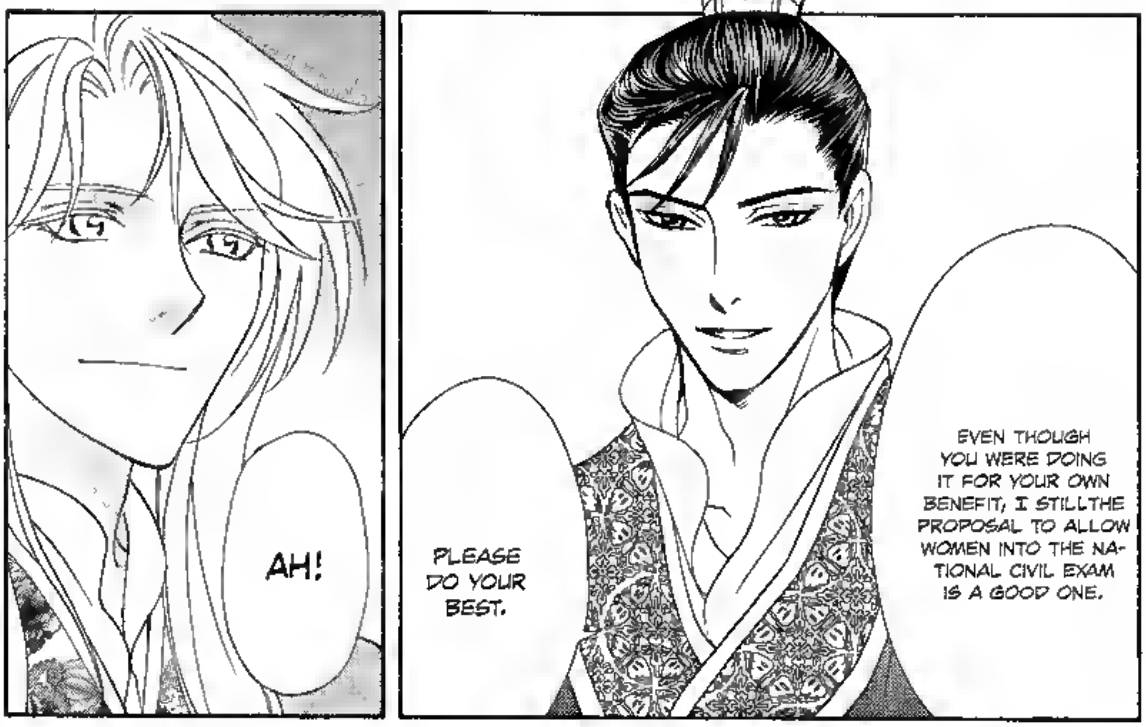
Or maybe it will stay joyful and survive without changing...

...Or perhaps, it's actually steadily approaching its goal.

Unlike my love, your love is better defined. I think I'm a little jealous.

...Well, even if I don't actually accomplish anything in the end, that's fine.
If the shape of a love patient enough to "wait" can be clearly defined, I would very much like to see it myself.
For, in love, it is the process that is most important.
THE PROBLEM WITH FORCING PEOPLE TO FEEL A CERTAIN WAY ABOUT YOU IS THAT THEIR FEELINGS NEVER ACTUALLY CHANGE.
YOUR HIGHNESS.
WHAT YOU MUST DO DOES NOT CHANGE.
SO WHAT IF SHUUREI-DONO WERE TO ACTUALLY BECOME A GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL?

...OR WERE YOU THINKING ABOUT SLACKING OFF ON YOUR END BY SIMPLY EMPLOYING SOME UNDERHANDED TACTICS?
...MAYBE. MAYBE I WAS THINKING ABOUT SLACKING OFF...
I SHALL REFLECT UPON MY MISTAKE.
YOU'RE RIGHT. THE FACT THAT I MUST PUT IN A LOT OF EFFORT DOESN'T CHANGE.

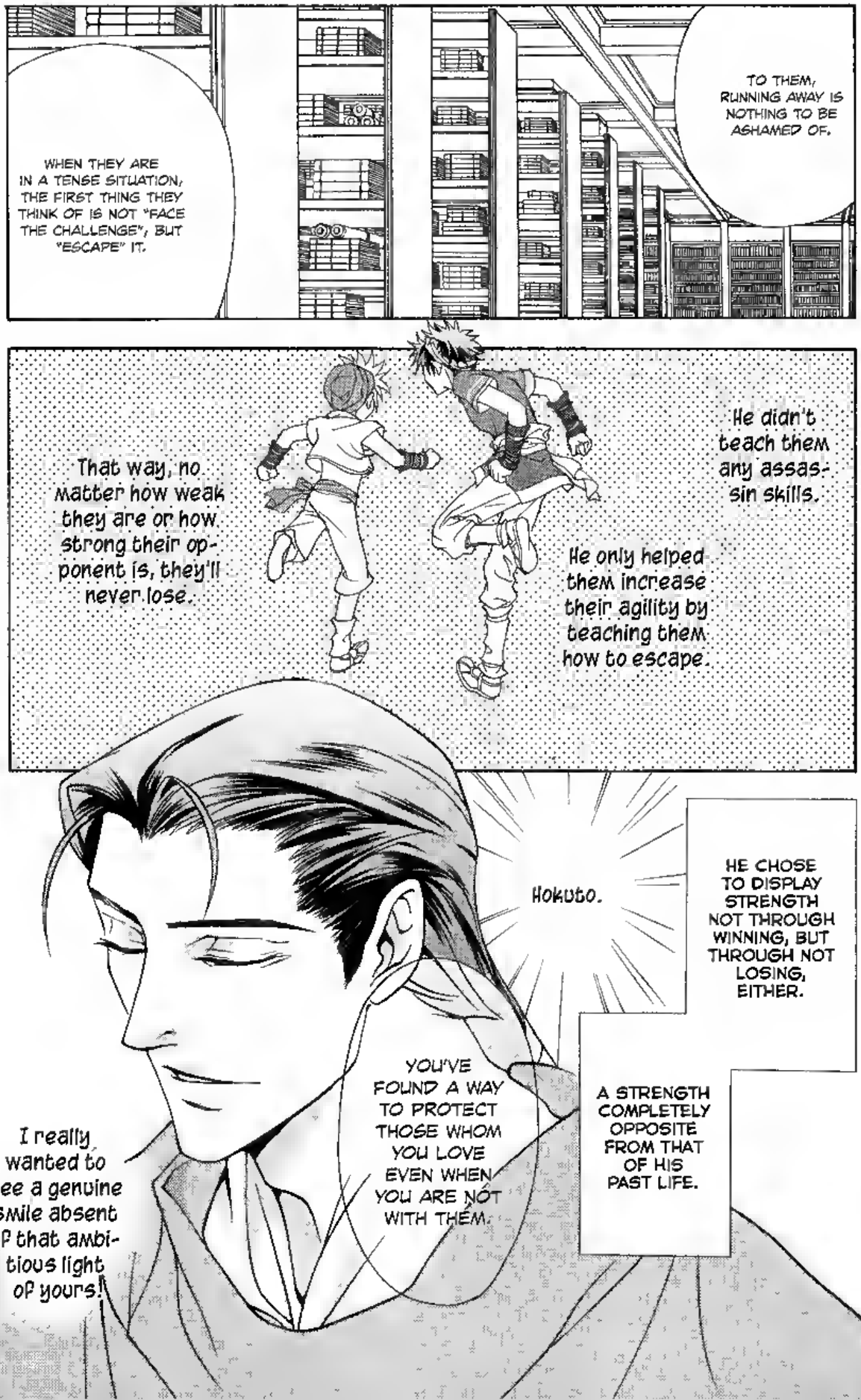

AH!
PLEASE DO YOUR BEST.
EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE DOING IT FOR YOUR OWN BENEFIT, I STILL THE PROPOSAL TO ALLOW WOMEN INTO THE NATIONAL CIVIL EXAM IS A GOOD ONE.

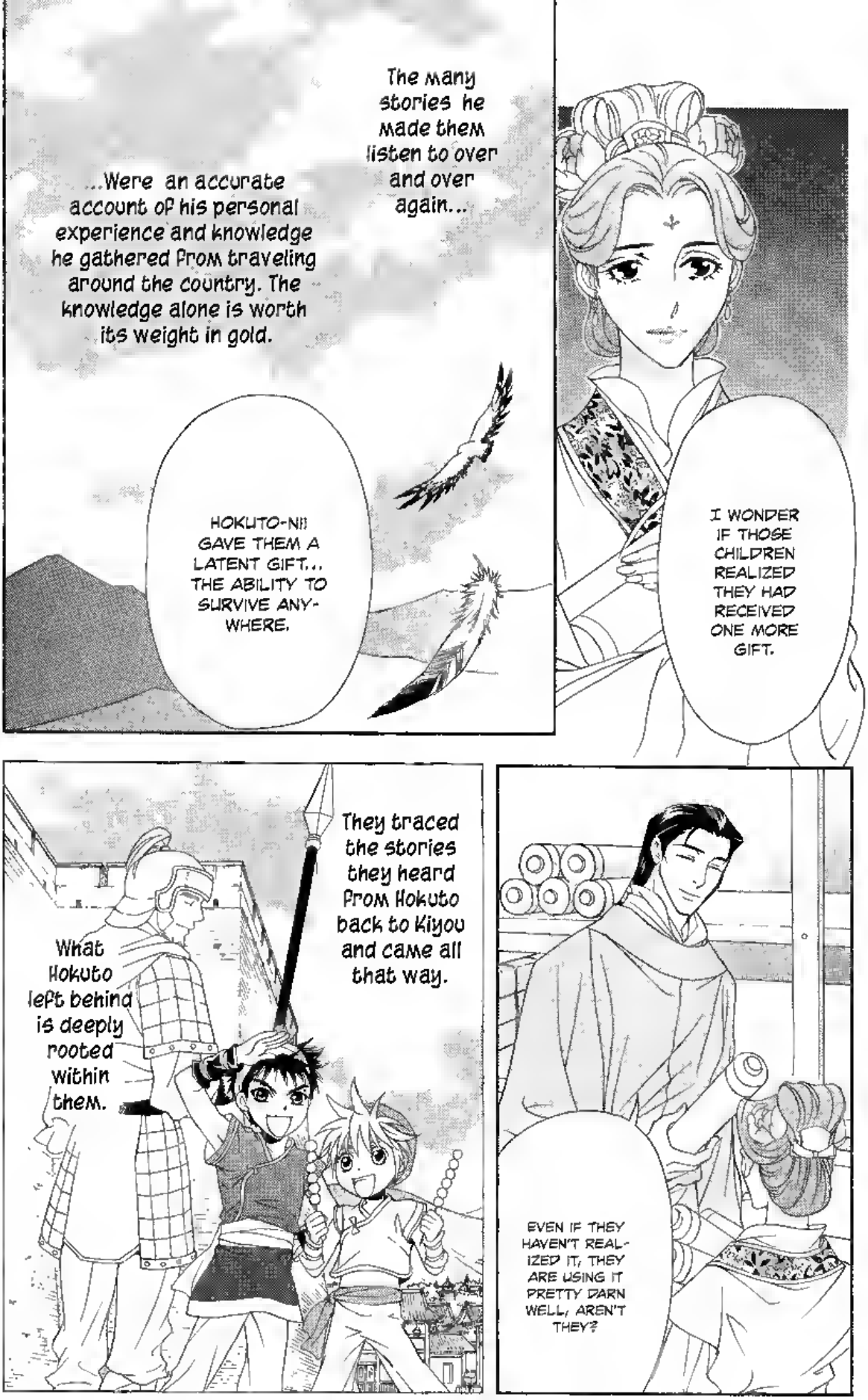
...But I think your honesty is a good indication of your love.

IT LOOKS LIKE THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE CHERRY SEEDLING ARE COMPLETE.
IT SHOULD HAVE ALREADY BEEN DELIVERED TO SHUUREI-DONO.
YES?
BY THE WAY, YOUR HIGHNESS.
REALLY?!
She used to stare desolately at the cherry trees in the inner courts.
I'M SURE SHE'LL BE DELIGHTED WHEN THE FLOWERS BLOOM IN SPRING.

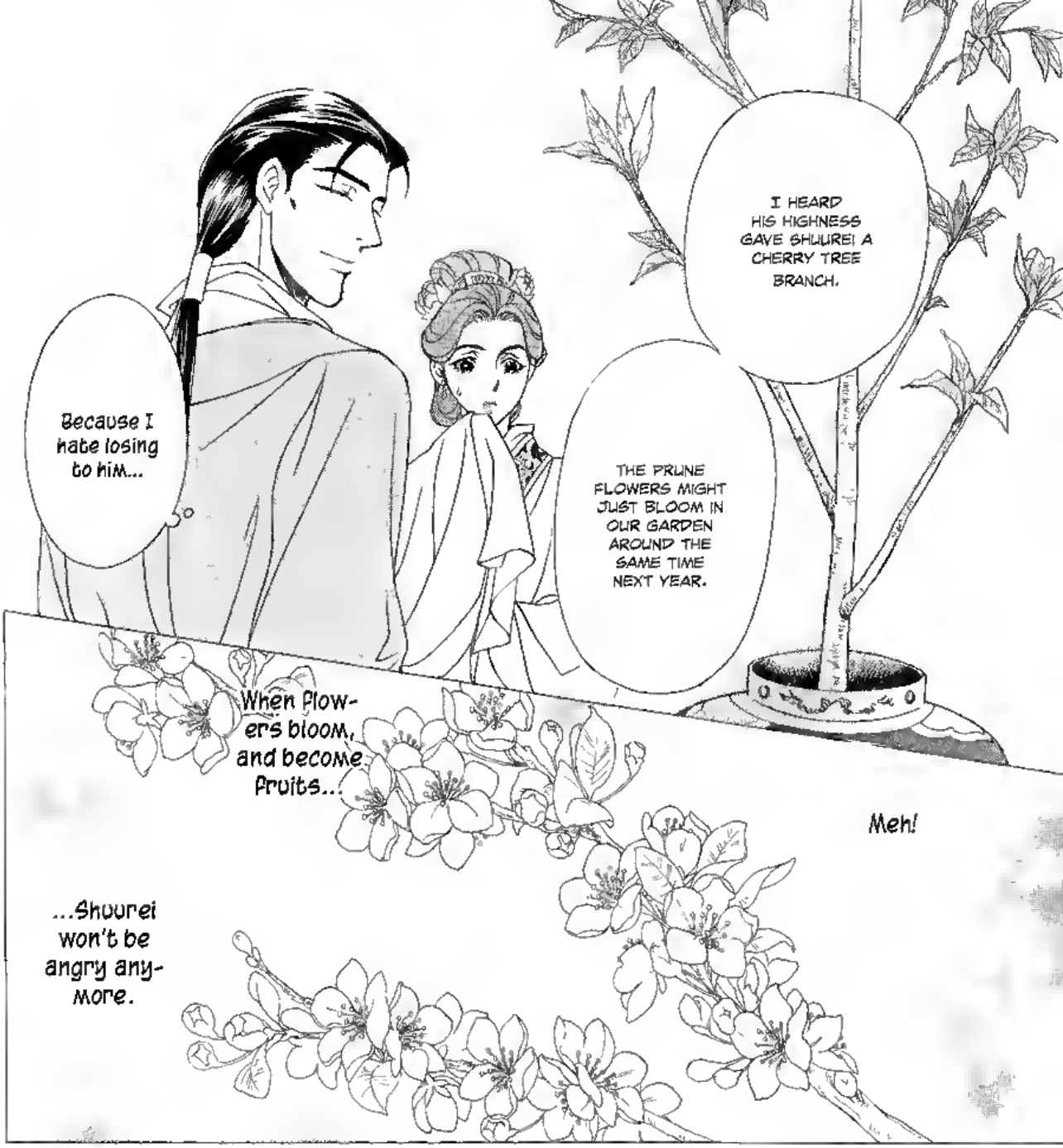
"Condors of Sashuu," huh?
chuckle
REMINISCING ABOUT AN OLD LOVE, SHOUKA-SAMA?
AH, I WAS JUST THINKING ABOUT HOKUTO (THE BIG DIPPER) AND HIS CHILDREN.
Shourin-kun and Youshun-kun...
...You two were raised by Hokuto, weren't you?

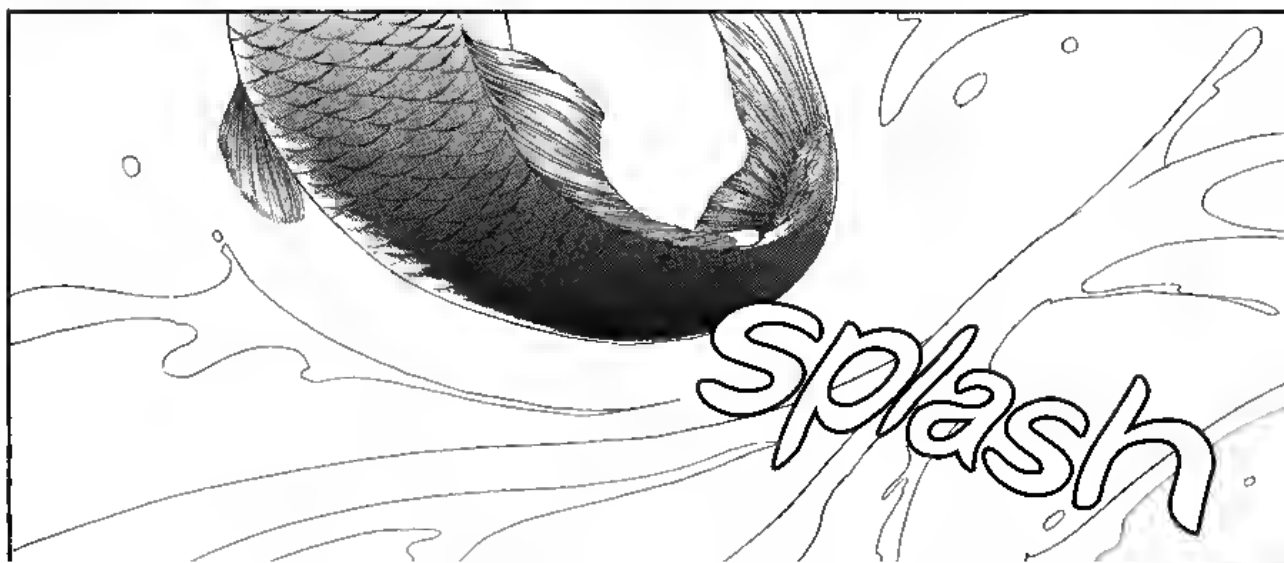
THE REAL REASON THOSE KIDS CAME ALL THE WAY TO KIYOU WAS BECAUSE...
...Their father had wanted to meet with his friend who lived in the captial, Kiyou.
It's where he and two others promised to visit one day.
Even though their father was gone, his entire world lay in Kiyou.
They had come to ascertain that world...
When the situation looks grim, run away!
Don't try to look cool, don't overdo anything.
In any case just keep on running.
HOWEVER, THE FIRST THING THAT SKILLED ASSASSIN TAUGHT THOSE KIDS WAS HOW TO ESCAPE.


WHEN THEY ARE IN A TENSE SITUATION, THE FIRST THING THEY THINK OF IS NOT "FACE THE CHALLENGE", BUT "ESCAPE" IT.
TO THEM, RUNNING AWAY IS NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF.
That way, no matter how weak they are or how strong their opponent is, they'll never lose.
He didn't teach them any assassin skills.
He only helped them increase their agility by teaching them how to escape.
Hokuto.
HE CHOSE TO DISPLAY STRENGTH NOT THROUGH WINNING, BUT THROUGH NOT LOSING, EITHER.
A STRENGTH COMPLETELY OPPOSITE FROM THAT OF HIS PAST LIFE.
YOU'VE FOUND A WAY TO PROTECT THOSE WHOM YOU LOVE EVEN WHEN YOU ARE NOT WITH THEM.
I really wanted to see a genuine smile absent of that ambitious light of yours!


The many stories he made them listen to over and over again...
...Were an accurate account of his personal experience and knowledge he gathered from traveling around the country. The knowledge alone is worth its weight in gold.
HOKUTO-NII GAVE THEM A LATENT GIFT... THE ABILITY TO SURVIVE ANY-WHERE.
I WONDER IF THOSE CHILDREN REALIZED THEY HAD RECEIVED ONE MORE GIFT.
They traced the stories they heard from Hokuto back to Kiyou and came all that way.
What Hokuto left behind is deeply rooted within them.
EVEN IF THEY HAVEN'T REAL-IZED IT, THEY ARE USING IT PRETTY DARN WELL, AREN'T THEY?

COMMEND-ABLE, HOKUTO.
I DIDN'T THINK YOU'D BE ABLE TO RAISE YOUR CHILDREN THAT WAY.
BY THE WAY, SHOUKA-SAMA.
YES?
WHAT IS IT YOU HAVE THERE?
OH, THIS?
IT'S A PRUNE TREE BRANCH.
PRUNE, IS IT?


I HEARD HIS HIGHNESS GAVE SHUUREI A CHERRY TREE BRANCH.
THE PRUNE FLOWERS MIGHT JUST BLOOM IN OUR GARDEN AROUND THE SAME TIME NEXT YEAR.
Because I hate losing to him...
When flowers bloom, and become fruits...
...Shuurei won't be angry anymore.
Meh!

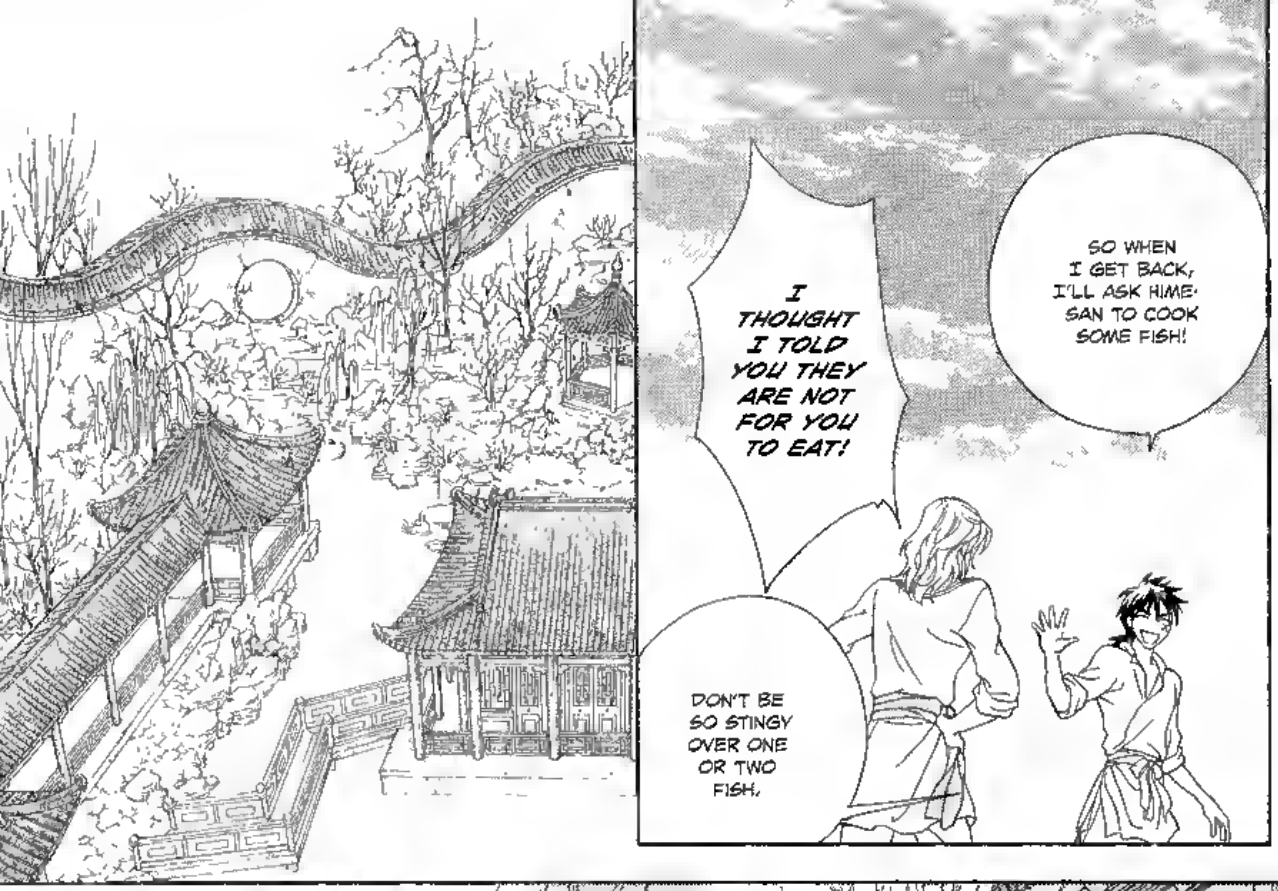

splash

LOOK, SEIRAN! AREN'T I A GENIUS?
IT'S SO FAT AND DELICIOUS-LOOKING!
MUNCHING
DON'T GET SO WORKED UP. ARE YOU A BEAR PREPARING FOR HIBERNATION OR SOMETHING?
I CAUGHT IT!
ALL RIGHT !!!
YEAH, YEAH, YEAH...
AND IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO EAT! GOT THAT?!
I HAD NO IDEA THAT YOU'D BECOME THE GOVERNOR OF SASHUU.
I COULD SAY THE SAME ABOUT YOU!
BUT TO THINK THAT THAT YOUNG MAN IS THE EMPEROR...

I SIMPLY CANNOT COMPREHEND THE FACT THAT YOU WOULD WANT TO BECOME A CIVIL OFFICIAL.
WHAAAT?!
YOU NEVER KNOW YOUR LOT IN LIFE. THAT'S WHY I THOUGHT MAYBE FOR STARTERS, I COULD TRY BECOMING A GOVERNOR.
I DIDN'T EITHER!
When Ensei was little, his entire family was killed...
...And he was left alone.
I'LL TELL YOU THIS. LONG AGO WHEN MY GRANDMA WAS STILL AROUND, MY GOAL IN LIFE WAS TO BECOME AN OUTSTANDING OFFICIAL.
I KINDA TOOK A LONG DETOUR, BUT I WAS ABLE TO RETURN TO THE PROPER ROUTE.

He was able to accept his cruel past head-on, without averting his eyes.
Ensei has the strength to always laugh everything off and carry on.
13 years ago...
...During that vacuous time when I was neither Seien nor Seiran...
...If I hadn't met him...
...I would never have been able to hold those warm hands...
What?
WHAT'S WRONG?
THAT SCAR ON YOUR CHEEK...

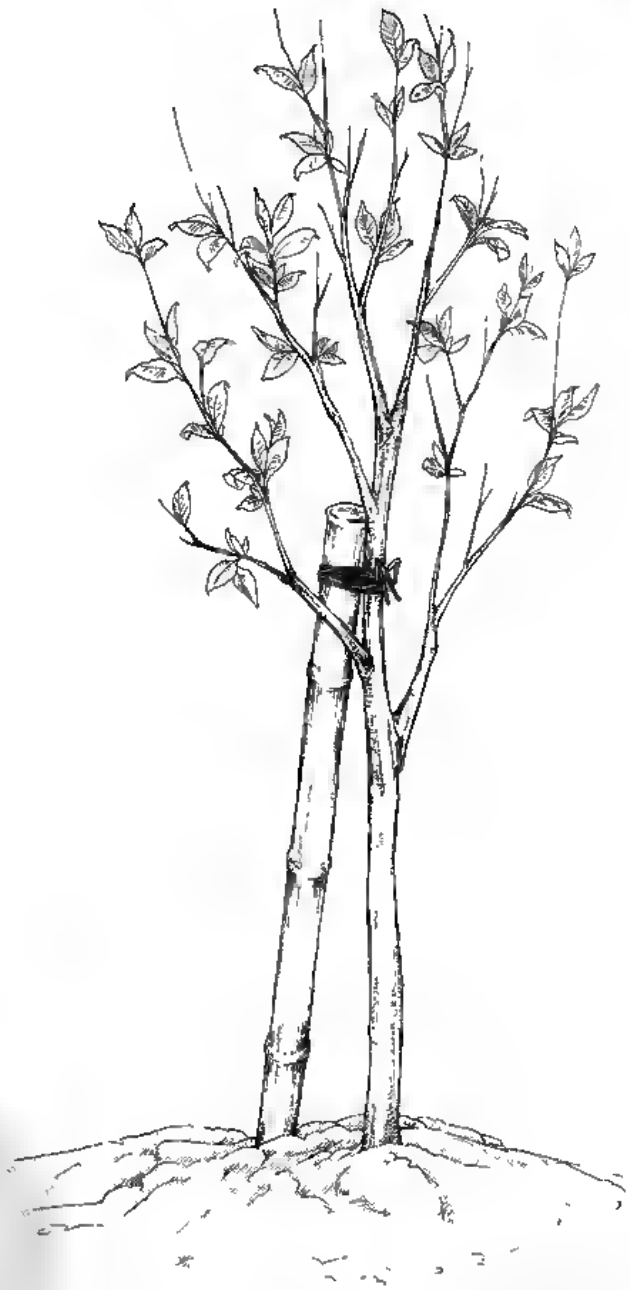
NAH ... IT HURT PRETTY BAD.
...I SHOULD HAVE DONE A BETTER JOB.
OH, YES.
YOU GAVE ME THE SHORTER ONE.
Gently
That's incredible...
....He was able to talk about his scar calmly.
I thought he'd never open that box of memories ever again.
STOP SPACING OUT. THE SUN IS SETTING.
I HAVE TO FILL THAT POND WITH FISH BEFORE RETURNING TO SASHUU.
splash
splash
THERE'S A SAYING THAT GOES, "IF THE WATER IS TOO CLEAR, THERE WILL BE NO FISH".
A POND WITH NO FISH IS STAGNANT.


SO WHEN I GET BACK, I'LL ASK HIME-SAN TO COOK SOME FISH!
I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU THEY ARE NOT FOR YOU TO EAT!
DON'T BE SO STINGY OVER ONE OR TWO FISH.

THERE IS MORE AND MORE GREENERY.
THE GARDEN IS QUIETLY PROSPER-ING...
rustling
...YET I'D BEEN IGNORING THIS VITAL-ITY...

Ryuuki gave me a cherry tree...

...Along with a new future...

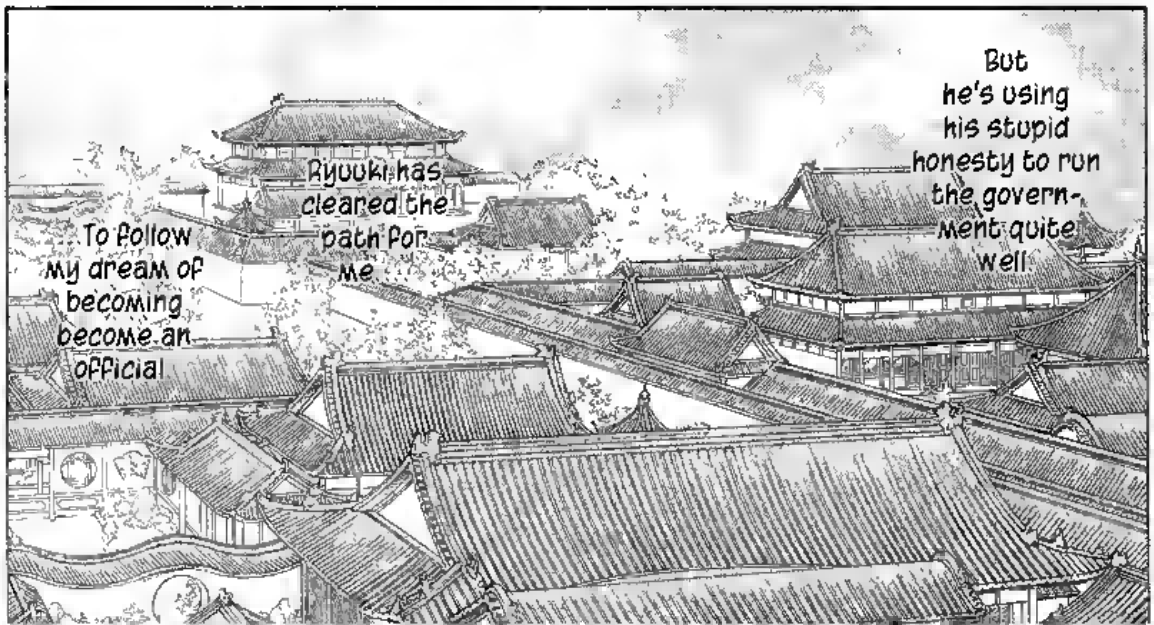


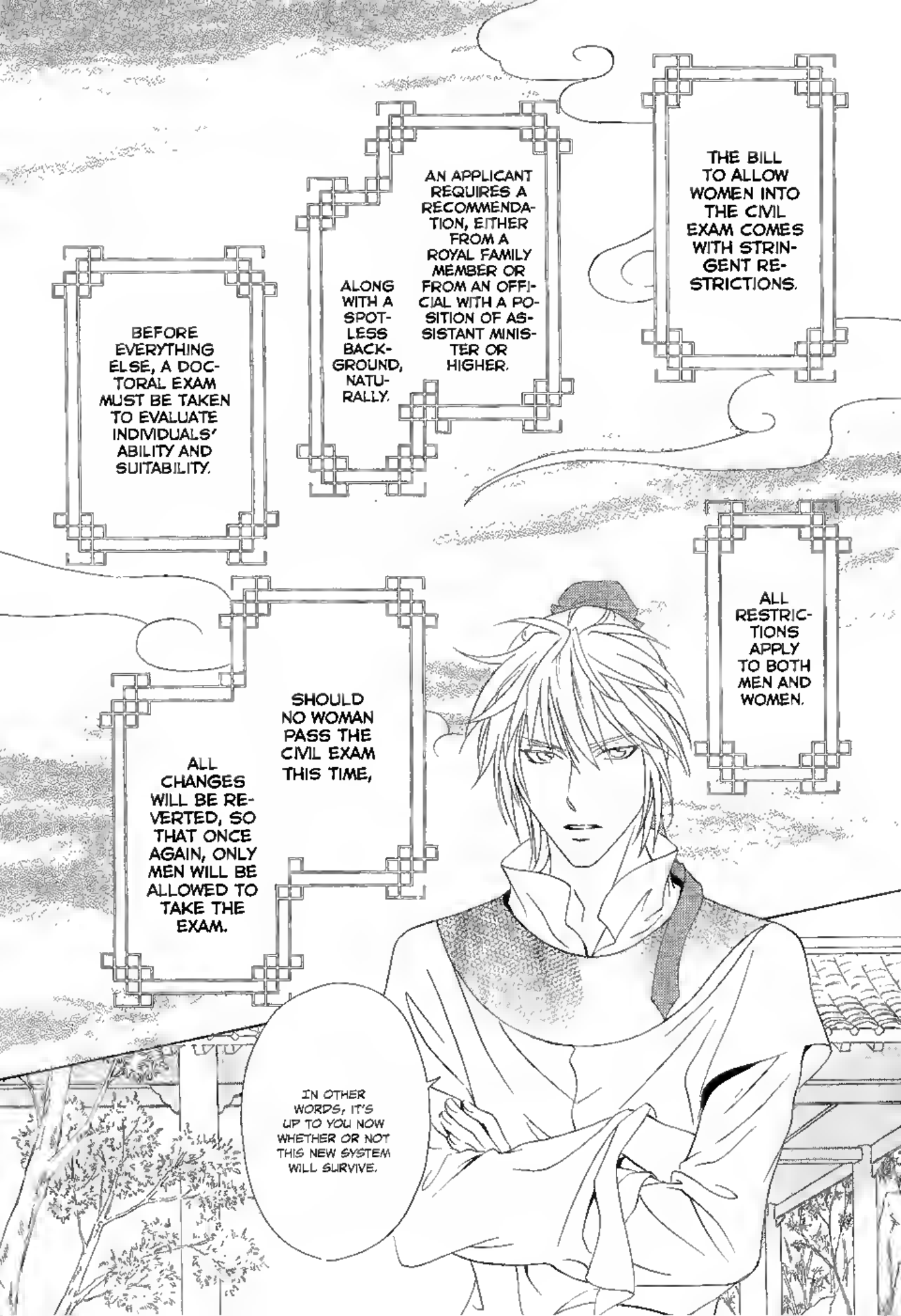
There's only one right now...
...It's still young and fragile...
...But it's storing energy to face its future.
Needless
The person who helped me carry it will cry too.
AREN'T CHERRY TREES USUALLY PLANTED IN THE WINTER?
I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK IT WILL DRY UP IN THE SUMMER.
WELL, IN ANY CASE...
Would you like this branch?
They say, "Snap some branches but not others"*

*Note: The original saying in Japanese, "Sakura oru baka, uma oranu baka," literally translates into "A fool who snaps cherry tree branches, a fool who does not snap plum tree branches." Supposedly, snapped cherry branches rarely survive while plum branches almost always survive. Shuurei says this in reference to the snapped cherry branch she has received from Ryuuki.

WELL, IT'S BECAUSE HE'S SUCH A BLOCK-HEAD.

BUT IF HE WASN'T, I DON'T THINK WOMEN WOULD EVER GET THE CHANCE TO TAKE THE NATIONAL CIVIL EXAM.
STUPID...


...To follow my dream of becoming become an official
Ryouki has cleared the path for me
But he's using his stupid honesty to run the govern-ment quite well


THE BILL TO ALLOW WOMEN INTO THE CIVIL EXAM COMES WITH STRINGENT RESTRICTIONS.
AN APPLICANT REQUIRES A RECOMMENDATION, EITHER FROM A ROYAL FAMILY MEMBER OR FROM AN OFFICIAL WITH A POSITION OF ASSISTANT MINISTER OR HIGHER.
ALONG WITH A SPOTLESS BACKGROUND, NATURALLY.
BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE, A DOCTORAL EXAM MUST BE TAKEN TO EVALUATE INDIVIDUALS' ABILITY AND SUITABILITY.
ALL RESTRICTIONS APPLY TO BOTH MEN AND WOMEN.
SHOULD NO WOMAN PASS THE CIVIL EXAM THIS TIME,
ALL CHANGES WILL BE REVERTED, SO THAT ONCE AGAIN, ONLY MEN WILL BE ALLOWED TO TAKE THE EXAM.
IN OTHER WORDS, IT'S UP TO YOU NOW WHETHER OR NOT THIS NEW SYSTEM WILL SURVIVE.

CONSIDER IT THIS WAY, I'M USING YOU.
KOUYUU-SAMA.
I NEED YOU TO PLACE HIGH AMONG EVEN THE MEN.
I'D SAY YOU NEED TO PLACE IN THE TOP 20 AT LEAST.
TOP 20?!
IF NOT, THE OLD SYSTEM WILL BE RESTORED, AND NO WOMAN WILL BE ALLOWED TO TAKE THE EXAM EVER AGAIN.
KOUYUU-SAMA, DO YOU REALLY THINK I CAN DO IT?

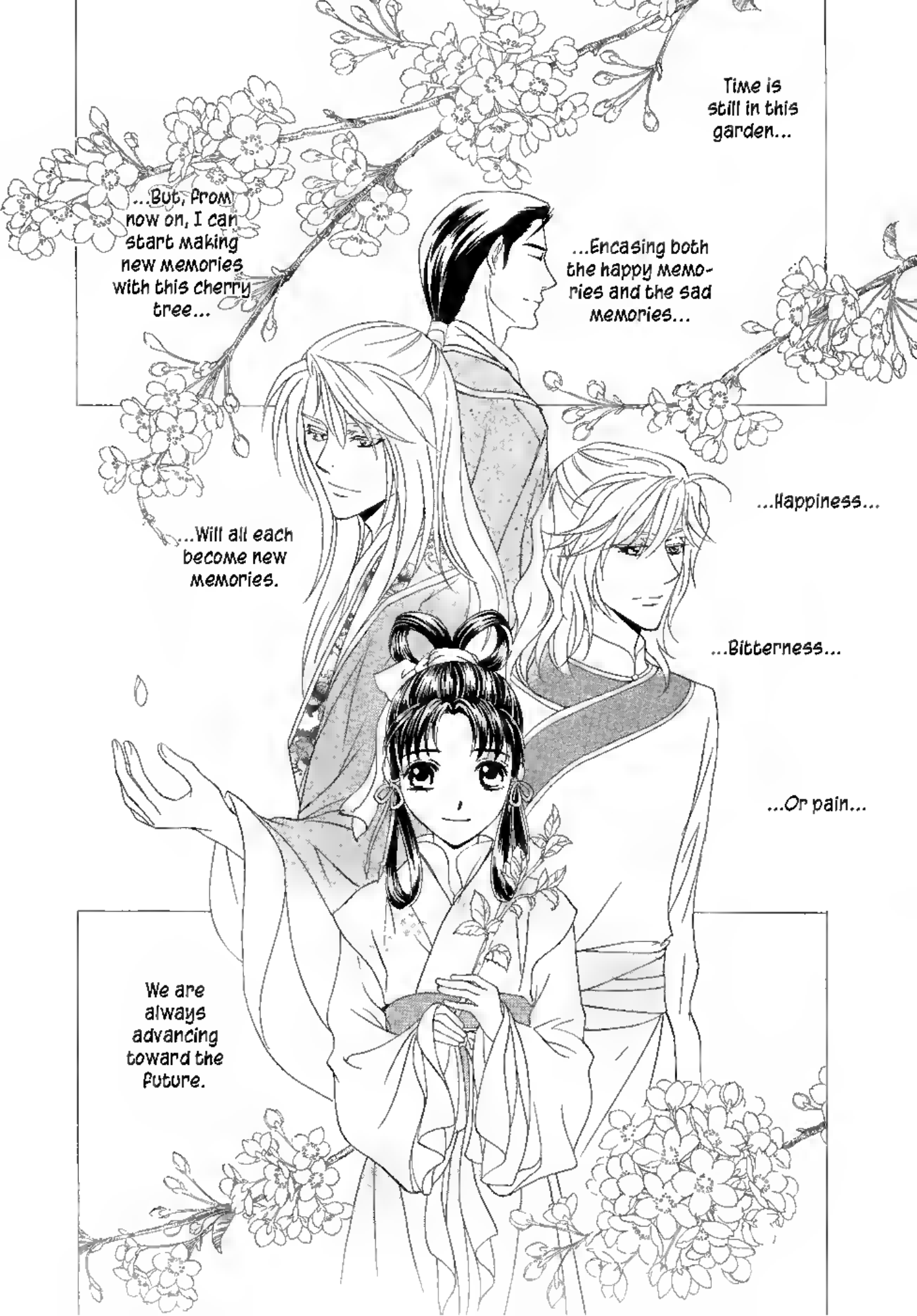
TO BE FRANK, NO ONE BUT YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH THIS.
YOU ARE MY PROTÉGÉ, AFTER ALL.

Why can't girls become officials?
...For the sake of the little girl who asked that question as she cried...

Kouyuu-sama, that's pretty unreasonable...
Top 20? If I rank in the top 20, then I'm pretty much guaranteed a high level position...
siiiigh

BUT NO MATTER HOW UNREASONABLE THAT MAY BE, I MUST TRY MY BEST FOR THE FUTURE.

I MUST DO IT!
The cherry tree branch Ryouki gave me is not alone.
It'll grow larger and larger...
...And some day, countless flowers will bloom...
I MAKE MY PROMISE TO THIS CHERRY TREE...
...I WILL OVERCOME ALL HARDSHIP!


Time is still in this garden...
...But, from now on, I can start making new memories with this cherry tree...
...Encasing both the happy memories and the sad memories...
...Happiness...
...Will all each become new memories.
...Bitterness...
...Or pain...
We are always advancing toward the future.

彩雲国物語

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